

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN ON ROCK





Chuck Klosterman on Rock

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The Jack Factor

Heavy metal's finest hour:
The three best-selling records on the planet
are Bon Jovi's *New Jersey*, Guns N' Roses'
Appetite for Destruction, and Def Leppard's
Hysteria.

Every time I invite a hipster over to my house (and this happens far more often than I'd like to admit), I put myself in a precarious position.

At some point in the evening, the visiting hipster is going to look at my CD collection—the single quickest way to assert any individual's coolness quotient. I do the same thing anytime I'm in another person's home. My problem is that (obviously) I am an '80s metal fan, and that devastates my indie rock cred. Since I'm not a musician, I'm not sure why this should matter; it certainly seems ridiculous that private citizens should need indie rock cred. But it always seems important, especially if I'm trying to sleep with the aforementioned hipster. And CD collections don't lie: No matter how many times you mention Matador Records, you cannot consistently explain why Poison is nestled between Pizzicato Five and Polara.

Of course, this situation can be played to one's advantage. You can out-hip a hipster by taking things to the next level—you can promote yourself as an Ironic Contrarian Hipster, the Jedi Knight among trendy rock fans. Being an Ironic Contrarian Hipster is rather complicated; it forces you to own over a thousand CDs, and you have to hate all of them. In fact, the only things you can openly advocate are artists like the Insane Clown Posse and Britney Spears.

Once you get the reputation as an Ironic Contrarian Hipster, you'll suddenly have a lot of freedom. You can sit around and watch *Roadhouse* and *Footloose* all day, and you can eat at buffet restaurants and wear stupid clothes and smoke pot before work because it's "wacky" to be a "bad employee." Most importantly, you can throw away all your cool records by Stereolab and Built to Spill and listen to stuff that's actually good. This

mostly equates to classic rock, new wave groups with female vocalists, Fleetwood Mac, any band from Sweden, and hair metal. If questioned about these choices, you simply scoff and smile condescendingly at your accusers. It also might be a good idea to tell them they need to “think outside the box” (or something like that), but you must say it in a way that indicates you would never actually use that phrase in a real conversation, despite the fact that you always do.

Unfortunately, there will be a point where someone will call your bluff. There will come a day when someone will say, “Hey man, I don’t care how far outside the box you think—there is nothing cool about owning Iron Maiden’s *Best of the Beast*.” And if they are serious and if you are not stoned, you will be forced to host a serious argument about the musical merits of heavy metal.

Arguing for the aesthetics of hair metal probably seems like an impossible task. There are no respected sources to provide support, and you can’t simply suggest that the sonics are too complicated for the average listener to understand. There is no high road. You can tell people they just don’t “get it,” but that’s really a self-defeating argument. Opponents will inevitably insist there’s nothing to “get,” and they’re not going to feel any regrets about missing the nothing that you are apparently “getting” and making it into “something.” In other words, they will pretty much have you over a barrel, and your only recourse will be insisting that Ani DiFranco is trying a little too hard to look ugly, which really isn’t that compelling of a point in most musical debates.

Usually, the fundamental strategy in prometal arguments hinges on an insistence that most metal is horrible. In order to seem rational, the metal advocate is constantly saying things like, “Yeah, I agree that most of those bands did suck, *but . . .*,” and then they try to build a larger point out of the ashes of a seemingly negative confession. They admit that hair metal did not succeed in a macro sense, but it was sometimes brilliant in a micro sense. This is the only way to seem like a sensible person (it’s the same philosophy one uses when trying to support the Libertarian Party).

What’s so frustrating is that this kind of statement actually applies to every genre of music (metal included). That’s the reality of rock ‘n’ roll: Just about every band is absolute shit. Listen to the *Sub Pop 200*. Listen to any disco compilation or punk retrospective. Listen to 98 percent of the ska bands that emerged in the mid-1990s (or most of the originals, for that

matter). The overwhelming majority of what you'll hear will be wretched. And it generally seems that fans know this, even though they might not feel comfortable admitting it. Few people listen to entire albums, even when they're released by their so-called favorite band. The single biggest force driving the compact disc revolution was not sound quality, nor was it durability: It was the convenience of being able to hear a specific track instantaneously, and then being able to move to another track as soon as the previous one got boring (usually, about two minutes and thirty seconds into a tune). Record reviewers spend way too much time analyzing albums in their entirety; this is because most rock writers have a problem—they like music way too much, often to the point of idiocy. It's very common to see an album panned because "there's not much beyond the single." I don't think that kind of logic matters. For example, *Tubthumping* by Chumbawamba has proven to be a more important album than Bob Dylan's Grammy Award-winning *Time Out of Mind*, simply because Chumbawamba's disc offered one great song that defined the moment of its popularity. I don't think there's any question about which of those two LPs will be more fun to find in a jukebox twenty years from now.

OKAY . . . so we've established that all popular music is basically crap. If your opponent agrees with that assertion, I suppose it essentially makes the rest of the argument moot, but arguments never end this way. You will inevitably keep talking and arguing and loudly scoffing and telling the other person to shut the hell up, and (at some point) you will need to explain what was good about heavy metal in a musical sense. And this *can* be done (sort of). There are a handful of metal records that are simply good—and I challenge anyone who disagrees to fight me!

Still, I've always found it a bit silly whenever someone makes a list of "essential" albums. None of my albums are the least bit essential to *anybody*, myself included. I mean, food is barely essential—most people can go two days without eating before they start gnawing at the flesh of their own grubby paws. Air is essential; water is essential; I suppose defecation is essential, lest you die of your own toxins. However, the Velvet Underground are never "essential." People always ask me questions like, "If you were stranded on a desert island, what five CDs would you want to be trapped with?" My answer: Five of those twenty-six-dollar remastered Pink Floyd discs that are made out of twenty-four-karat gold. The content of the disc is irrelevant; I simply assume gold would be malleable enough to

pound into an arrowhead so I could kill myself a wild boar. Gold is also nice and shiny, which is ideal for bartering with the natives (maybe they could trade me a kayak or something). Things that are *essential* are things that keep you alive.

Of course, once we get beyond semantics, I would have to begrudgingly admit that I love my CDs. They give me a lot of pleasure, and they remind me of better days. And that's the criteria for the following list of "Nonessential Hair Metal Records I Really, Really Like."

It's always difficult to set up parameters for this kind of list. First of all, it's basically impossible to find an indisputable definition for what qualifies as "hair metal." I don't want to exclude any good bands simply because they didn't wear mascara, and I don't want to strictly limit this catalog to releases from 1980 to 1989. So instead of specifying what records I will consider, I've decided to simply outline the albums I won't consider.

Every rock record is eligible for this list, with the following exceptions:

- 1.) No **Led Zeppelin albums**. Just about every Zeppelin record is better than just about every record on the following buyer's guide, so I don't see any sense in mentioning the obvious. This is the material that created hair metal. There is no value in measuring teachers against pupils.
- 2.) No **Ozzy-era Black Sabbath albums**. Same justification as Rule No. 1.
- 3.) None of the **first four Van Halen albums** will be considered. Same justification as Rule No. 2.
- 4.) No **alternative bands that some people would call heavy metal just because they're loud** (Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Primus, Nine Inch Nails, etc.). Even though they might display sonic similarities, it comes from an entirely different aesthetic sensibility.
- 5.) I will not include any **KISS albums from the era with makeup**, nor will I list any **Aerosmith albums from their 1970s drug phase**. Skip back to Rule No. 1 if you're still confused.
- 6.) No **multi-artist compilation albums** released by Rhino Records after 1995. No multi-artist compilation albums sold on TV, either.
- 7.) No **"seminal influences."** (For example, I'm not going to throw in the White Album just because "Helter Skelter" is on disc two and it would make me seem like a better student of pop history.)

8.) I will include no **albums that are only noteworthy for having a cool title**. In other words, I am resisting the urge to include *Bangkok Shocks*, *Saigon Shakes*, *Hanoi Rocks*, even though it's unspeakably fun to type.

9.) No **Alice Cooper concept records**, and no **Alice Cooper records that seem like concept records** (which—as far as I can tell—is the entire **Alice Cooper catalog before he started to suck**).

10.) Finally—and here's a big one—no albums from **groups who have no logical reason to be listed here**. If no reasonably informed person would classify a given artist as a “metal act,” I'm not going to put them on this list, even if I could make a semi-entertaining argument as to why they warrant inclusion. For example, the guys in Oasis may have been groupie-shagging coke addicts who could out-rock Trixter eight days a week—but “Acquiesce” ain't metal, and both of us know it.

I'm not listing these records in any real order, except that—at the conclusion of every review—I print the amount of cash someone would have to pay me never to listen to that record again. I call this the “Jack Factor.” Personally, I have little love for money (especially after reading *Tuesdays with Morrie*), but bones are the only means our society has to measure stuff. As part of that society, I must do the same. To me, that's always the best way to measure how “essential” something *really* is—if you can't buy it off me, it must be pretty important. You might want to look at it as rock criticism via Ayn Rand.

Now, when I say that I would “never listen to something again” for X amount of dollars, realize that I'm not insane. For example, I'm not going to jump out of a moving car if “Sweet Child O' Mine” comes on the radio. I'm not going to walk out of my sister's wedding reception if the DJ spins *Out of the Cellar*. What it means is that I would remove the CD from my collection, never buy it again, and never actively put myself in a situation where the primary goal would be hearing the music. It may be worth noting that I currently earn an annual salary of \$54,400 and my rent is \$605 a month. My car is not paid off, and I will be repaying my student loans until 2004.

So, keeping this in mind . . . let's rock shit up, bitch!

* * *

Van Halen, 1984 (1984, Warner Bros.): More obligatory than necessary, the videos off this album were much better than the songs. It's certainly the least groundbreaking VH record from the David Lee Roth years (in fact, I sometimes think the middle section of 5150 actually has way better songs). However, it's probably the best effort from producer Ted Templeman (the drum sounds on *1984* are particularly stunning). It also provides multiple examples of Van Halen's longtime secret weapon: the backing vocals of bassist Michael Anthony. The all-time single-best illustration of Anthony's wonderful harmonizing is on the "Ooh, baby baby" part from "Dance the Night Away" on *Van Halen II*, but *1984* has a larger bank vault of Anthony larynx-oriented gems.

I've never been informed as to why "House of Pain" was finally included on this LP, since that's one of the oldest songs in the Van Halen catalog (you can hear versions of it on bootlegs from 1976). It's probably just supposed to be a treat for the type of metal trivia fanatics who win bar bets by knowing that Edward Van Halen soaks his guitar strings in honey. **(Jack Factor: \$66)**

L.A. Guns, *Cocked and Loaded* (1989, Polydor): In the same way that Mudhoney has become famous for being the guys from Green River who didn't join Pearl Jam, L.A. Guns will always be remembered as the guys who hung out with Axl but didn't become Guns N' Roses. Since they kind of jumped into the fray late (their debut LP was in 1988), they never really had an opportunity to be superstars (in fact, I think a lot of people assumed they called themselves "L.A. Guns" to gravy train off GNR). Nonetheless, they quickly developed a small-yet-loyal fan base. At the time, there was a minirivalry between Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe, and a lot of the Crüe supporters saw L.A. Guns as an espoused rival to Axl's group, prompting them to buy *Cocked and Loaded* as a show of solidarity for Vince Neil.

On the whole, this is a better LP than most people would like to remember. Tracii Guns was a workmanlike virtuoso, and he produced several shards of semi-wicked metal ("Rip and Tear" being the best of the bunch). Of all their efforts, *Cocked and Loaded* has the least amount of throwaways (which is a nice way of saying *Cocked and Loaded* still has a little too much shit on side two, but that's no sin). If you remember this album at all, it's probably for "The Ballad of Jayne." As soon as they got the taste of success, L.A. Guns took the Aerosmith route and pushed a prom

song, which will always be a pretty fast way to get famous. **(Jack Factor: \$80)**

Scorpions, *World Wide Live* (1985, Mercury): As a general rule, I hate all non-KISS, non-Cheap Trick live albums, but this one demands inclusion (if for no other reason than it seemed to remind all their peers that metal bands were socially obligated to make at least one shitty live record). Considering how much the people of Canada love Rush, one has to assume that Germans literally worship the Scorpions. I mean, what else is there? Kraftwerk? Warlock? I've always wondered if the Scorps somehow represented the German culture (kind of in the same way the Cardigans and Whale seem to reflect Scandinavia). If they do, I will never go there, regardless of how fast I get to drive.

The big-ticket item on *WW Live* is "Rock You Like a Hurricane," the breakthrough hit about rocking like a hurricane. I tend to prefer the studio version off *Love At First Sting*, but maybe that proves I only rock as hard as a tropical storm. I wish they would have included "Love Drive," the best tune this band ever made, but it's not here. In fact, the smart Scorps shopper might be better served by buying the 1989 compilation *Best of Rockers n' Ballads*, which (at least according to the title) should cover both poles of the Scorpions' guitar-charged ineptitude. **(Jack Factor: \$92)**

AC/DC, *Back in Black* (1980, Atlantic): Just about everyone in the free world perceives *Back in Black* as AC/DC's ultimate contribution to society, and I suppose I agree, which generally makes me wonder how this band got so popular. But they obviously knew what the fuck they were doing: This record sold 14 million copies, and I suspect it will be recertified platinum every three years until the apocalypse.

Prior to Bon Scott's vomit-gorged death, AC/DC was a legitimately intriguing group, particularly when they were saying "Oi!," whacking girls in the head with billiard cues, and/or inspiring Richard Ramirez to kill people. What's unfortunate (or perhaps admirable) is that this album made all of Scott's catalog obsolete: Unless you're a serial killer, AC/DC will forever be remembered as a buzzsaw guitar band, and that's mostly because Angus Young was so stunningly effective on *Back in Black*. On the strength of two particularly captivating tunes—"You Shook Me All Night Long" and the bone-crushing "Shoot to Thrill"—Young cemented a certain kind of

guitar tone that would influence every '80s metal band that wasn't interested in being cute (and eventually Veruca Salt, who actually were). **(Jack Factor: \$98)**

Ratt, *Out of the Cellar* (1984, Atlantic): Until *Appetite for Destruction* exploded in '88, this was probably the single-biggest record to rise from the L.A. glam scene. Even though Ratt never seemed as popular as Mötley Crüe, they initially sold better; "Round and Round" was able to score more consistent radio play than "Smokin' In the Boys Room" and "Looks That Kill" combined.

The best songs on *Out of the Cellar* tend to be the "hits," which equate to "Round and Round," "Back for More" and "Wanted Man." To be honest, the rest of the record hasn't aged that well. Ratt struggled with the fact that they had a rote delivery; they seemed a little too musically serious and never had the luxurious sleaze factor of the grittier Sunset Strip groups. They were able to slide by on the strength of an unappetizing band name and smart marketing (the *Out of the Cellar* cover shot was a postapocalyptic image of Tawny Kitaen that made them seem auspicious), but all they really had were a few good songs and Stephen Percy's bangs. In 1985, they made a second album (*Invasion of Your Privacy*) that sounded exactly like this one, and it did the same sort of business. I guess I'm still a little bit confused as to why we all loved this band, but I know we did, because I still remember playing every one of these songs over and over and over again. We simply could not resist the awe-inspiring power of Ratt 'n' Roll. **(Jack Factor: \$110)**

KISS, *Lick It Up* (1983, PolyGram): This was the first KISS record to feature the band unmasked (which somehow didn't happen on *Unmasked*), and it's the only one where psychopathic axe genius Vinnie Vincent was on board for all the playing and composition. Vincent clearly dominated the songwriting sessions (he gets credit on eight of the ten tracks), and *Lick It Up* sounds vastly unlike all previous KISS records. The other guys in KISS swear he's a jackass, but Vinnie's artistic template ultimately set the direction for the band's next four or five efforts.

When left to his own devices, Vincent plays incredibly fast. Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley forced him to slow down and play behind the beat, which was an attempt to mimic Ace Frehley's style (Simmons refers

to this as the “monster plod”). The only song where Vinnie is able to shred maniacally is “Fits Like a Glove,” which is (ironically) one of the only two songs he didn’t help write.

By and large, *Lick It Up* is a pretty good hard rock record and the catalyst for KISS’ recovery as a platinum-selling artist. It’s got quite a bit of filler (which was an all-too-common problem on every KISS record from the ’80s), but the better stuff—“Fits Like a Glove,” “All Hell’s Breaking Loose,” and the title cut—proved that Paul and Gene could make competitive, contemporary metal music for a second (third?) generation of KISS fans. If *Lick It Up* had tanked, one might speculate that KISS would have folded—or maybe they just would have reunited with Ace and Peter ten years earlier. **(Jack Factor: \$125)**

W.A.S.P, *Live . . . in the Raw* (1987, Capitol): After three studio albums, W.A.S.P had quickly established themselves as the most sexually depraved rock band in America. As far as Tipper Gore and the Parent’s Music Resource Center were concerned, W.A.S.P was Public Enemy No. 1, mostly because they liked to pretend they were butchering women onstage. Tipper Gore was actually the best thing that ever happened to W.A.S.P; thanks to the PMRC, the band got famous for a song virtually no one in America had ever heard—“Animal (Fuck Like a Beast),” a track that Capitol refused to release (and was subsequently distributed as an “underground single” on the Music for Nations label).

That song isn’t on this record, but most of W.A.S.P’s better material is. None of their studio albums were spectacular; the best was probably 1985’s *The Last Command*, which was recently re-released with a bonus cover of Mountain’s “Mississippi Queen.” (For reasons that shall forever remain unknown, the entire W.A.S.P catalog was re-released by Snapper Music in 1998, as if these works were somehow lost musical treasures that demanded further examination.)

W.A.S.P frontman Blackie Lawless was briefly the tour drummer with the New York Dolls, which basically meant he understood showmanship (if not necessarily musicianship). Almost all of these songs improve when played live, particularly “9.5 Nasty” and “Harder Faster.” There’s also a nice segue between Humble Pie’s “I Don’t Need No Doctor” and “L.O.V.E. Machine,” two songs about needing medical attention but having sex instead. Lawless described himself as a “Manimal” who slept in a fire and had to ride an intoxicated horse from Long Beach to Los Angeles, much of

which I suspect is untrue. Though I can no longer understand what seemed so appealing about buckets of blood and raw meat, these guys definitely had their gooey paws on the metal community's pulse in 1987. If only they had been willing to perform oral sex on each other, I'm sure they could have been Marilyn Manson. **(Jack Factor: \$129.99)**

Judas Priest, *British Steel* (1980, CBS Records): I'm a bit disappointed this album didn't make me want to kill myself, but I still enjoy it immensely. It has a sense of credibility that most metal albums lack, although you'd never guess that if your only exposure was the ultra-stupid track "Metal Gods."

Yet for all practical purposes, *British Steel* defines all the stereotypes of the metal genre: screaming, soaring vocals; screaming, soaring guitars; booming bass; machine gun drums. It's impossible to deconstruct a song like "Breaking the Law," nor can you deny the tight, clean perfection of "Living After Midnight." By all accounts, *British Steel* is a cornerstone of late-twentieth-century hard rock, even if a few of the songs manage to be really heavy and really lame at the same time. And I'm still waiting for "United" to become a gay anthem. **(Jack Factor: \$160)**

Junkyard, Junkyard (1989, Geffen): This L.A.-based band got an incredible amount of mileage from the fact that Axl Rose wore a Junkyard T-shirt to a GNR photo shoot and was subsequently shown promoting the band in about two dozen different photographs in five different metal magazines. Rose might have done that because he liked Junkyard, or he might have done that because Junkyard was on Geffen and somebody in a blue suit told him it would be a fine idea to pretend he was a fan. Either way, it worked—it seemed like everybody had heard of this group before they ever released any records.

My gut tells me Axl probably *did* like Junkyard, mostly because they had the same sort of trashy, hooker-hungry, just-an-urchin-livin'-under-the-street appeal. Vocalist David Roach sounded a lot like Vince Neil (in fact, when I heard "Hollywood" I thought it was Mötley Crüe), and he was especially Axl-esque at combining depression with semidangerous anger. "Hands Off" is maybe the best metal song ever written about having a woman break your heart; when Roach says "God *da-amn*" he may as well be Hank Williams. **(Jack Factor: \$172)**

Heavy Metal, Music from the Motion Picture (1981, Elektra): This movie is pretty lousy if you're sober and/or an adult, and the soundtrack should be either glammier or skankier, or maybe both. But it does have the best Sammy Hagar ever recorded ("Heavy Metal"), the only decent post-Oz Sabbath tune ("The Mob Rules"), some foxy witch rock (Stevie Nicks's "Blue Lamp"), and some nifty math rock (Devo's "Working in a Coal Mine"). Nine of the sixteen tracks have magnificent intros, so the album makes for wonderful car music in the summer. It's also fun to get drunk and cry during "Open Arms," and maybe even call your ex-girlfriend and apologize for things that actually happened in an altogether different relationship with an altogether different person. Just trust me on this one. Steve Perry is a fucking genius. **(Jack Factor: \$180)**

Ace Frehley, *Frehley's Comet* (1987, Megaforce): I'm not exactly sure what Ace Frehley did between his 1982 departure from KISS and this '87 debut. I do know he smashed a Porsche in Connecticut and was arrested for driving 110 m.p.h. in a DeLorean on the Bronx River Parkway, and I have to believe he was pretty wasted during both of those incidents because he always seems to combine both events into one singular story. That patchwork narrative became the premise for the song "Rock Soldiers," the first cut on *Frehley's Comet*.

Ace's problem as a frontman was always abundantly obvious: His voice is terrible. But that's also his strength; like Jimi Hendrix and Courtney Love, his stunning inability to sing on key makes his music charming. KISS fans adored his contributions to *Love Gun* and *Dynasty*, as well as his exceptional 1978 effort, easily the best of the ill-fated KISS solo albums. And through most of the 1980s, *Frehley's Comet* sounded more like KISS than KISS did.

The value of *Frehley's Comet* is its quirkiness. I think it's cool that Anton Fig is the drummer. I like the tune that sounds like Journey ("Calling to You") and I love the song that sounds like a combination of Ted Nugent and the Jeff Twilley Band ("Love Me Right"). I find it intriguing that a male rock star would write a song that pays tribute to his doll collection ("Dolls"). And I am forever amused by Frehley's obsession with making sure all of his lyrics rhyme *exactly*. Dave Barry once pointed out that Steve Miller found a way to rhyme the word "Texas" with the phrase "What the facts is" (in that same song, Miller also managed to pair the word "justice"

with the phrase “other people’s taxes”). Poets refer to this literary device as “slant rhyme.” Ace would never be so bold. His lines are always stiff, parallel rhymes—except for one awkward attempt to pair his own surname with the line “Don’t be silly.” Oh well. **(Jack Factor: \$199)**

KISS, *Animalize* (1984, PolyGram): This was the best KISS effort from the sans makeup years, and it was pretty much Paul Stanley’s baby (by this point, Gene Simmons was becoming infatuated with his film career and putting no effort whatsoever into songwriting). In fact, if you listed the twenty best KISS songs of all time, *Animalize* is the only post-Kabuki album that would have a tune to offer, the yowl-driven single “Heaven’s On Fire.” This was an extremely popular song in my junior high, and it prompted my neighbor to create a naughty little parody of the chorus: “Feel my meat / Watch my cock rise / Burn with me / My ass is on fire.” Granted, this was only slightly more polished than “Weird” Al Yankovic, but I still think it was pretty clever for a sixth-grader who was burdened with the nickname “Ippy.”

Animalize is the only KISS record that features Mark St. John on guitar; soon after making the record, he contracted an incredibly rare arthritic disorder that caused his left hand to swell to the side of a midsize rhinoceros. St. John would eventually recover and form White Tiger, a band most people mistakenly called “White Lion” or “Glass Tiger,” which wouldn’t have been a big deal if those hadn’t been the names of other bands who were already more popular. But to be fair, St. John actually does a damn nice job on this LP, especially when you consider he was fundamentally a studio hack and was clearly instructed to play like one.

Beyond “Heaven’s On Fire,” the tune everyone seems to remember off *Animalize* is “Burn Bitch Burn,” the closest Simmons ever came to writing a straightforward joke song (except of course for “Domino,” which hopefully is a joke). The most memorable lyric was “When love rears its head, I want to get on your case / Ooh baby, I wanna put my log in your fireplace.” We all thought this was hilarious . . . except for Ippy, who probably considered it to be a little lowbrow. **(Jack Factor: \$200)**

* * *

Tesla, *The Great Radio Controversy* (1989, Geffen): This was glam metal to play inside the cab of a tractor—bluesy, denim, and downright *wholesome*: On “Be a Man,” former cement truck driver Jeff Keith tells us to “do right by the ones you love, and always lend a helping hand.” According to Tesla, this is what it takes to be a man. I guess nobody informed them that life ain’t nothin’ but bitches and money, and that’s beautiful.

Traditionalists usually prefer their harder-rocking debut (1986’s *Mechanical Resonance*) and kids who played hacky sack enjoyed 1990’s deadheaded *Five Man Acoustical Jam*, but *The Great Radio Controversy* is still the best record Tesla ever made. It melds nonelectric instruments with unglossy riffing, and even a little Neil Young-ish pregrunge on “Heaven’s Trail (No Way Out).” Unlike their peers, Tesla ignored the temptation to make formulaic power ballads and wrote normal AM radio relationship tunes, the best example being the bittersweet “Love Song.” Of course, I still can’t understand why the fuck this band cared who “really” invented the radio, and I still occasionally catch myself mispronouncing their name “Telsa,” just like every other kid at my school. Come to think of it, we always seemed to erroneously call their first album *Mechanical Renaissance* too. Maybe Tesla turns kids into mindless deadheads (which I suppose is a pretty blatant oxymoron). **(Jack Factor: \$217)**

Mötley Crüe, *Girls Girls Girls* (1987, Elektra): This is the Crüe’s “dark” album, mostly because it’s about drugs instead of the devil. Written by Nikki Sixx during the depths of his smack addiction, it’s supposed to be about fucking strippers, but it’s really about being fucked in the head. On “Wild Side,” Vince Neil tells us that “A baby cries / A cop dies / A day’s pay on the wild side.” It seems that Sixx forgot to mention if this is supposed to be good or bad; judging from the context, he could really go either way. *Girls Girls Girls* ends up being a very nihilistic project, probably by accident; when Nikki tried to write a nihilistic album *on purpose* in 1994, it was slightly less successful than the introduction of New Coke.

The music on *Girls . . .* is more consciously bluesy than the other Crüe albums, hence the horrific live cover of “Jailhouse Rock.” I tend to like the first three songs on side two (especially “Five Years Dead,” mostly because it sounds like they’re saying “*Bach* is dead,” which actually makes more sense), and I’ve always enjoyed the sentimental throwaway “Nona,” a

tribute to Sixx's dead grandma (which is especially touching when followed by "Sumthin' for Nuthin'," a song about having sex with grandmas who are still alive). Of course, I'm not exactly sure how any of this was supposed to fit the image they were fostering at the time: Mötley had evolved from '81's "glam metal" to '83's "shock rock" to '85's "glitter pop," finally settling on this incarnation—some kind of leather-clad biker persona that mostly seemed like an homage to Al Pacino's *Cruisin'*. But you know, whatever. **(Jack Factor: \$229)**

Warrant, *Dirty Rotten Filthy Stinking Rich* (1989, Columbia): The first release by the very first band I ever saw play live (May '89, West Fargo Fairgrounds, opening for Great White and Ratt), this magnum opus was dedicated to a girl who "lost her cherry but that's no sin / she's still got the box the cherry came in." That's pretty vapid and so are most of these lyrics, but it's the yummy kind of vapid. The album opens with a song about living on thirty-two pennies in a Ragú jar, but by the start of side two they want to light cigarettes with hundred-dollar bills and wear ocelot pelts to the farmer's market in rural Ohio, which is evidently what you do when you're a Down Boy.

If you experienced your first episode of finger-banging between August of 1989 and March of 1990, it probably happened while you were listening to "Heaven." However, the true value of this record is the Poison-esque rockers like "Big Talk" and "Ridin' High." You did not bang your head to Warrant; this was actually music you *danced* to (or at least shimmied). The bass sludge is almost non-existent, and the words are delivered with a pop earnesty typically reserved for people like Todd Rundgren. *Dirty Rotten* . . . was followed by the even more successful *Cherry Pie*, but this remains a better project overall, mostly because it's smarter (in that vapid, yummy kind of way). It also has one of the greatest liner notes of all time: "All concepts by WARRANT." That's right—all *concepts* (by WARRANT). Hmm. Maybe this was actually supposed to sound like *Aqualung*. (Jack Factor: \$258)

David Lee Roth, *Eat 'Em and Smile* (1986, Warner Bros.): Opening with Mr. Roth lying in a gutter and talking to a guitar about his "Yankee Rose," *Eat 'Em and Smile* bumps and grinds like the whore Dave is, all the way down to a closing stab at being glam metal's Frank Sinatra. The lineup is

pretty solid (Stevie Vai on the six-string, Billy Sheehan on the four), and it absolutely blows the doors off Van Hagar's 5150. Though Dave never made a decent record after this one, he gets major props for expertly building a record around a specific personality type: the horny white gigolo who's easy and crazy and wants to shoot you with his elephant gun. No artist has ever *needed* to make a solo album more than Diamond Dave.

At every wedding dance, there is always one uncle who drinks too much, dances too much, and tells the most ridiculous stories over and over and over again. He's the hero or the goat of every story he tells, and you can never quite tell if he's the most boorish jackass in your family or the most charming fellow you've ever met. David Lee Roth is that uncle, and *Eat 'Em and Smile* is his master work. **(Jack Factor: \$275)**

Bon Jovi, *Cross Roads* (1994, Mercury): Purists always deride greatest hits records, usually claiming that the songs "lose something" when the order is changed. That's stupid, especially since nobody ever listens to a compact disc in its proper sequence anyway. I'll take the *Best of Blondie* over *Parallel Lines* eight days a week, and it certainly seems like everyone at the party has more drinks whenever we play *The Best of Van Morrison* instead of *Astral Weeks*. The same goes for this collection of Jonny B. Jovi's best stuff, and maybe even more so: It seems like the only good Bon Jovi songs were the popular ones. This band has no forgotten gems whatsoever (except maybe "Love Is a Social Disease," but even that's a major stretch).

What they do offer is happy, sunshine metal that made all the girls shriek and all the guys wear styling gel. I doubt if Jon ever figured out what day it was from what he was drinking (or if he ever even got drunk), but "Wanted Dead or Alive" is a classic road song, copied poorly by about four hundred other bands. "Lay Your Hands on Me" and "Bad Medicine," the melodramatic opening tracks off *New Jersey*, still sound captivating. And in retrospect, "You Give Love a Bad Name" really isn't as horrible as I'd like to remember (if nothing else, it undoubtedly inspired Firehouse's "Don't Treat Me Bad," which I sometimes think might be among the forty finest songs ever released in the U.S.).

Jon Bon Jovi is kind of the Robert Frost of heavy metal. The great thing about Frost was that his poems weren't always about metaphorical bullshit; sometimes a poem about *chopping wood* was actually about chopping wood. Bon Jovi was the same way; he wrote literal lyrics and dulcet

melodies, and they didn't worry about credibility or attitude or the legacy of Tony Iommi. We may remember Bon Jovi as the safest of all these metal bands and certainly the most stereotypically commercial, but they were real songwriters who simply tugged at heartstrings instead of brainstrings. That fluffy aesthetic is all over the cowboy-saturated *Cross Roads*. In fact, I even like the inclusion of "Someday I'll Be Saturday Night," despite the fact that Jon sounds a little like a bad Bruce Springsteen or a good Bryan Adams. **(Jack Factor: \$288)**

Metallica, . . . *And Justice for All* (1988, Elektra): This inclusion is something of a contradiction, because every Metallica record prior to this one contains better songs. But . . . *And Justice for All* is far and away the most interesting work the group ever produced; never before had speed metal been so freaky. Seven of the nine tracks are longer than six minutes (two are longer than nine), and Kirk Hammett often seemed to be playing riffs backward (and sometimes sideways), but it never seems flashy or forced. Sometimes I think Hammett is the most underrated guitarist of his generation, even though he bores the piss out of me 80 percent of the time.

As is always the case with Metallica, the majority of the lyrics are apocalyptic hogwash, but this is still an incredibly smart LP that's legitimately experimental. Part of the sonic weirdness comes from a bizarre production decision: You can't hear Jason Newsted's bass lines at all on . . . *And Justice for All*, and that's intentional. Apparently, his musical exclusion was part of Newsted's "hazing" for having the gall to replace Cliff Burton, the original Metallica bassist who died when a bus fell on him in Europe.

To be honest, it's too bad that bass moratorium was eventually lifted. Ever since this LP came out in '88, Metallica has evolved into a remarkably average band who just happen to play really loud. Everything they've released in the past decade has been boring and weak, with the exception of one cool song about werewolves and a nice cover of Thin Lizzy's "Whiskey in the Jar." But maybe that's what people like me said about Zeppelin in 78. **(Jack Factor: \$294)**

Van Halen, *Diver Down* (1982, Warner Bros.): Generally poohpoohed by most devout Halenheads, I find this their most endearing effort. Though it doesn't have a singular killer tune (like, say, "Unchained" off *Fair Warning*) and even though it's not frenetic or bottomless (like *Women and*

Children First), it's the only VH album that never gets boring, even when it tries to be (i.e., the six minutes and twenty-four seconds of "Cathedral," "Secrets," and "Intruder"). The Marvin Gaye-penned "Dancing in the Street" has been covered by about two hundred artists, but Roth's is the best; I also prefer Dave's take on Roy Orbison's "(Oh) Pretty Woman" and the Kinks' "Where Have All the Good Times Gone!" (though I've never understood why the title of that particular tune is punctuated with an explanation point instead of a question mark; is this not a question, or is it just an enthusiastic cliché?).

Though I can understand why some fans take umbrage with the amount of unoriginal material on this project, I think that's an asinine complaint. Van Halen used to be the greatest cover band in the world, and that means a lot. At its core, the beauty of Van Halen is not Eddie's virtuosity or the strength of its incredible rhythm section; the beauty of Van Halen is that they were *fun*. Along with side two of *Van Halen II* this was as fun as it ever got. (Jack Factor: \$333)

Living Colour, *Vivid* (1988, CBS): Mick Jagger produced these rasta rockers, and he even loaned his bulbous lips to the backing vocals on "Glamour Boys," still one of the funniest songs I've ever heard, especially when one tries to imagine little nancy boy Mick claiming he's fierce. But Jagger's influence doesn't go much beyond that chorus (although he did score them the opening slot on the '89 Stones tour).

Vivid is not swaggering, jukebox metal; it's a well-lubricated record with lots of sheen and purpose. "Cult of Personality" is pretty much a thrash-orama that was whittled into a radio tune, but it always hits like a tsunami (I've actually seen it start mosh pits at wedding dances). I think Corey Glover's comparison of Gandhi with Stalin is supposed to make us think about the media (or something), but it really just reminds us that the guys in Living Colour aren't a bunch of morons, which should have been the least of their worries. The simple fact is that *Vivid* is fabulous when it rocks out, but it's pretty goddamn janky when it tries anything else. It's the same story with 1993's anachronistic *Stain*, a good album that always seems ashamed of itself. Living Colour is one of those hard rock groups who suffer from self-loathing; since all the members seem to think metal bands are stupid, they will ignore what they do best in order to be classified in a different category, even if that means singing a song titled "Open Letter (to a

landlord).” When you consider how unintentionally rockin’ *Vivid* turned out to be, it’s frightening to think how awesome this band could have been had they actually tried. **(Jack Factor: \$379)**

Skid Row, *Skid Row* (1989, Atlantic): Like a grizzly that stumbled across a bunch of honey-covered hippies, this is straight-forward carnage: hair-wagging, Bud-guzzling, boot-kicking, no bullshit rock ’n’ roll (or *all* bullshit rock ’n’ roll, if you follow my meaning). When I went back and found this cassette in my closet, I was surprised to discover this album came out as late as it did; I tend to remember the Skids being a bigger part of the ’80s than they actually were.

If nothing else, Skid Row deserves credit for being honest; lots of bands claimed their next album was going to be “a lot heavier,” and Skid Row is the only band who wasn’t lying (1991’s *Slave to the Grind* could swing with Megadeth). Still, this debut is the one that matters. The first four songs never relax; Sebastian Bach screams about mammary glands, somebody’s sweet little sister (I’m guessing not his), and girls who smoke cigarettes when they cry. “18 and Life” was the pulp that made them famous, and it’s one of the rare metal tunes that told a story (Rupert Holmes could probably cover it). “Youth Gone Wild” was their war anthem; it was actually the title of my high school yearbook when I was a senior (and I wasn’t even on yearbook staff!). “I Remember You” might have been a bit too stereotypical as the obligatory power ballad, but Baz’s range was better than most, and he was too damn anorexic (and too pretty) to ignore. To paraphrase the coolest fifth-grader I never interviewed, Skid Row rules ass. **(Jack Factor: \$400)**

Cinderella, *Long Cold Winter* (1988, PolyGram): Nobody in the world sounds like Cinderella vocalist Tom Keifer. In the eyes of many, that’s probably good. But in the realm of glam, Keifer might have been the most compelling throat around. If there was ever a dude who really did sound like the proverbial “cat caught in the gears of a combine,” it was Tommy—and that’s a compliment (at least when applied to *Long Cold Winter*).

Keifer actually had two voices: a baritone drawl (which he used in the introductions of ballads), and a maddening, nasalinjected screech (which he used for everything else). I realize I’m probably making this music sound horrific, and part of me suspects it probably was, but MAN, was that screech perfect for the first three tracks on this icy rock opera. “Bad

Seamstress Blues” is legitimately clever, “Fallin’ Apart at the Seams” is simultaneously poofy and menacing, and “Gypsy Road” is just a good, good, good, good, good song.

The hidden gems on *Winter* are on the flip side, namely “Take Me Back,” which is a lot like the KISS hidden gem “Comin’ Home” off *Hotter Than Hell*. What’s weird is that Cinderella *also* has a song titled “Coming Home” (note the addition of the *g*), but it’s a different vibe altogether. On “Coming Home,” Keifer asks his prospective princess if she’s “tough enough” for his love, which is probably a legitimate question: It would be tough to love any guy who was born with Tom’s voice. But like I said, it was killer for bluesy poodle rock.

1988 was Cindy’s peak; this record went triple platinum, just like their debut (*Night Songs*). I honestly believe Cinderella was one of the bands who were underrated by almost everyone, except possibly fourteen-year-old girls. Maybe I don’t give mall chicks enough credit; maybe it’s time to admit that fourteen-year-old girls are the only people in America who truly understand what coolness is supposed to look like. **(Jack Factor: \$455)**

The Cult, *Electric* (1987, Sire): Ian Astbury and Billy Duffy have made a lot of records in their career (too many, frankly), but this was their best effort and certainly their most metal. The weird thing about the Cult is that they were a hard rock band that people who hated metal always seemed to dig; I’m constantly running into alt rockers who claim their favorite bands in high school were New Order, Erasure, and the Cult. Generally, these types sing the praises of 1985’s *Love* (and for some reason, most old-school metal kids tend to align themselves with 1989’s *Sonic Temple*), but *Electric* is the band’s tastiest cream.

There is a surprisingly pleasant sameness to all eleven of these tunes, which spikes during “LiI’ Devil” and “King Contrary Man” and dips into painful valleys during the hippy-dippy “Peace Dog” and a godawful cover of “Born to Be Wild.” The most memorable track is “Love Removal Machine/7 which is legitimately surreal; I’ve always wondered what a love removal machine would look like—probably something like an electric chair attached to a bottle of bourbon. Either way, Duffy’s guitar licks sound more like Jimmy Page than Page’s himself sounded on *Outrider*, and Astbury’s coonskin cap is exactly like the one I wore for Halloween in 1979 and 1980, except I was probably a little cooler (but since I didn’t know any

fourteen-year-old girls at the time, I guess we'll never know). **(Jack Factor: \$512)**

Poison, *Open Up and Say . . . Ahh!* (1988, Capitol): Ten seconds into this album, some girl is giving head to Bret Michaels, and “she goes down smooth, like a shot of gin.” How smooth is that? Well, to be honest, not very. But that’s what was great about Poison: Things like the relative smoothness of gin paled in comparison to the “greater concept,” which didn’t make any sense but always resulted in driving and looking for girls who were already drunk.*

When *Open Up . . .* was released, I remember reading a bunch of reviews where writers claimed it lacked the “rollicking fun” of Poison’s first album, *Look What the Cat Dragged In*. This confused me, because those same writers had all hated that first record, too. Bret and C. C. didn’t get breaks from anyone; I remember hearing *fourth-graders* bitch about them. And that’s probably why this album still seems so refreshing. If Poison cared what people thought of them, they certainly didn’t act like it. They had debuted with an album that made kids want to steal Citron from their parents and cum in their jeans—and then they made another! C. C. De Ville played lead riffs that even I could figure out (and I can’t play guitar), but he was better at sucking than almost everyone else in the world.

When the guys in Black Sabbath were growing up in Birmingham, they were all poor kids from an industrial neighborhood. When they got famous in the ’70s, that social despair poured through their black-hearted music. The guys in Poison grew up in industrial Pennsylvania, and their youth was similarly grim. However, Poison got famous during the 1980s, and they fucking loved it. *Open Up and Say . . . Ahh!* is an Epicurean affirmation of all that is great about cheesy, plastic rock ’n’ roll. It wasn’t merely that Poison wanted nothing but a good time—they asked the world why they were supposed to want anything else. And in 1988, that was a good question. **(Jack Factor: \$555)**

Faster Pussycat, *Faster Pussycat* (1987, Elektra): As a sophomore in high school, I didn’t know who the fuck Russ Meyer was, so I thought this was a really wussie name for a rock group. Truth is, they *were* pretty much wussies, but they were some of the most streetwise wussies in L.A. (and if you don’t believe me, go rent *The Decline of Western Civilization, Part II*).

Almost of all of this LP is terrific, particularly the black-and-bluesy sleaze on “Don’t Change That Song” and “Cathouse.” Most of the initial attention surrounding this album was granted to “Babylon,” a rap song that seemed like an attempt to rip off Anthrax’s attempt at ripping off *Licensed to III*, but it sure seemed funny at the time.

However, it was the second side of *Faster Pussycat* that paid the rent. “Smash Alley” examined the downside of high heels and switchblades and also reminded me that I should probably listen to my Smashed Gladys cassette more often. “Ship Rolls In” was pretty much an Aerosmith song, but it wonderfully captured the identity of glam metal in three lines from vocalist/fellatio advocate Taime Downe: “You gotta roll with the punches, spin like a top / I ain’t got much, but I got a lot of PER-SO-NAL-ITEEEEE / And that’s all that counts.” Taime, you’re pretty smart for a wussy. (*Jack Factor*: \$580)

Vinnie Vincent, *Invasion* (1986, Chrysalis): Like a Tasmanian devil whirling toward vaginas and self-destruction, the guitarmageddon unleashed by ex-KISS wackmobile Vincent on this solo debut is so schlockily stunning that I still have to play this album at least six times every year.

Never was metal as brilliantly self-indulgent as it was on *Invasion* (which would soon become part of the group’s actual name, hence the better known moniker “Vinnie Vincent Invasion”). After this first record, the group hired Mark Slaughter’s throat and Vinnie went to hell, both as a rocker and as a human being (for all I know, Vinnie now lives on the moon and wears his Egyptian ankh makeup whenever he surfs the Internet for *alt.talk.creaturesofthenight*). But for select moments on *Invasion*, V V is the fastest, craziest, and downright best six-string shredder to ever wear pinkish lavender in public.

Right from track number one, you know what you’re getting: “Boys Are Gonna Rock” has *two and a half guitar* solos. Singer Robert Fleischman screams about sadomasochism and ejaculations, but—for all practical purposes—this may as well be an instrumental album. At the conclusion of “Animal,” Vincent plays faster and harder and faster and harder and faster and stupider and he’s going nowhere but he’s getting there fast and now your neighbors are banging on the wall and your bookcase speakers are starting to melt and your beagle is in obvious pain and suddenly you suspect

that everything in your house is going to IMplode. And then Vinnie collapses, and then you hear six seconds of reverb. And then the next song begins (with a guitar solo). It should be also noted that *Invasion* ultimately ends with 151 seconds of Vincent replicating a car alarm (or perhaps a grain elevator). This is rock 'n' roll. This is rock 'n' roll? This is rock 'n' roll! **(Jack Factor: \$675)**

Def Leppard, *Pyromania* (1983, PolyGram): First of all, let me say—purely as a fan—I probably prefer Lep's 1981 release *High 'n' Dry*. The title track on that record smokes everything here, and "Let It Go" is dandy rock candy. But I also realize that *Pyromania* is the better record. For a bunch of twenty-one-year-old alcoholics in need of personalities, the level of musical sophistication on *Pyromania* is amazing. I suppose the majority of that credit should go to Robert "Mutt" Lange, who earned the right to sleep with Shania Twain for producing an album this immaculate. The knock against Def Leppard has always been that they're "overproduced," which is precisely what artists want when they ask Lange to engineer their records. Most producers—like Bob Rock, for example—took metal bands and tried to capture the "liveness" of the sound (when Rock did Mötley Crüe's *Dr. Feelgood*, he played up the guitar tones and Tommy Lee's orangutan drumming). Lange does the opposite; he works more like a smart copyeditor. Everything is polished until it's ultraclean and hyperefficient, so you only notice the main riff and the soaring vocals (this was even more obvious when he produced *Back in Black*).

Granted, this kind of recording philosophy doesn't work with a lot of artists. But it's a perfect recipe for a legitimately talented metal outfit, and that's exactly what Def Leppard was. "Rock! Rock! (Till You Drop)" is the ideal opening, and "Photograph" is the best Journey song ever made. *Pyromania* is infected with a bunch of pre-irony studio gimmicks (like the intro to "Rock of Ages" and the supposedly "space age" crap after track ten), but it doesn't have any bad songs, either.

Critics of '80s hard rock sometimes point to *Pyromania* as an example of what was wrong with the whole industry: The stock argument is that this record is sanitized arena pop that doesn't deliver *anything* that could affect a listener—the lyrics are about nothing, the music is perfectly calculated, there's no emotional investment by the artist, and there's not even a *constructed* sense of humanity. However, the only person who would come

up with that kind of analysis is somebody who simply hates heavy metal and wants to make up a bunch of reasons to explain why Fifteen years later, I can experience the same concepts I heard in my bedroom when I first got *Pyromania* from the RCA Music Service: Controlled aggression that cloaked an Orwellian fear (witness “Stagefright,” “Die Hard the Hunter,” “Foolin’,” and “Billy’s Got a Gun”). It’s stupid to blame Def Leppard for being flawless. *Pyromania* was metal’s *Pretzel Logic*—a studio masterpiece that validated the genre. **(Jack Factor: \$877)**

Guns N’ Roses, *GNR Lies*, (1988, Geffen): When we first heard this eight-song EP, we all thought the live material on side one was tits and the acoustic stuff on side two was girly crap. Over time, the conventional wisdom revolved into the opinion that the “R” side was brilliant and the “G” side wasn’t worth listening to. Ten years later, I have rediscovered the value of the former without losing respect for the latter (or maybe it’s the other way around).

Lies opens with “Reckless Life,” an accelerated rocker that would seem to be the résumé for the whole GNR experiment. That blows into a cover of “Nice Boys,” which works because Axl Rose really does seem like a *boy*. Of course, that makes everything a bit awkward on “Move to the City,” because suddenly Axl becomes a girl who stole her daddy’s credit card—but by the time they’re halfway through a rote version of “Mama Kin,” nobody cares anyway.

Logic would dictate that the lyrics on the flip side should seem less shocking as time passes, but I find them more spooky today than I did in high school. As I grow older, I’m still intrigued by what Axl was so angry about. His inability to replicate this kind of ferocious emotion on future releases makes me suspect it must have been genuine; if it had all just been a show, you’d think he could do it anytime he stepped into a studio. There seems to be something obviously wrong with Axl Rose’s brain, and it’s the kind of three-act neurosis that ruins a man’s life, makes a man famous, and then ruins his life again (and usually in that order). Side two of *GNR Lies*, is the peak of Act II. **(Jack Factor: \$920)**

Ozzy Osbourne, *Blizzard of Ozz/Diary of a Madman* (both 1981, Jet): Obviously, this is kind of cheating, because I’m counting two albums as one. But it’s almost impossible to separate these first two releases from

Osbourne's solo career. If there is truly such a thing as "companion albums," these two would be the defining example (um . . . okay—I mean if you *don't* count *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*).

Blizzard and *Diary* are, of course, the only two albums Ozzy made with Randy Rhoads, and Oz has apparently never recovered; Ozzy insists the twenty-eight months he worked with Randy seem longer than the rest of his life combined. He talks about Rhoads the way most people would discuss a deceased wife (on the liner notes to 1987's *Tribute*, he says Rhoads was what he had "dreamed about" in a guitar player and credits him with ending his depression). Part of that loss might be purely practical: Rhoads's ability as a player is—at times—stunning. The conventional wisdom is that *Blizzard of Ozz* is a masterpiece and *Diary of a Madman* sounds rushed and uneven, but I think they're equally excellent. In fact, I probably prefer the sophomore release.

Blizzard of Ozz was the perfect vehicle for Osbourne's solo ascension, because it's basically Sabbath music played wicked fast. There was a vaguely classical quality to Tony Iommi's playing, and Rhoads took that one step further (and got there quicker). Over his thirty-year career, "Crazy Train" stands as the best song Ozzy ever yowled. In his book *Running with the Devil*, Robert Walser points out how the guitar riff on "Suicide Solution" jibes with the lyrics: a cycling, disturbing drone that virtually mirrors clinical depression. Top to bottom, this is simply a good record—it's remarkably well-conceived and wisely structured.

Those two statements probably can't be made about *Diary of a Madman*, but it doesn't matter, because Rhoads's effort is even better. I generally find guitar solos pretty boring (doesn't everybody?), but I can listen to these; "Over the Mountain" might be more clever than ingenious, but it always blows me away. "Flying High Again" is intended to be this album's "Crazy Train" (it's even in the same place—track two), and I think it sort of succeeds in that attempt (it's also the last song Ozzy made that was indisputably pro-drug). There are a couple of nice slower tracks on *Diary*—I especially like "Tonight," which could have been a huge single had it been released five years later—but the real kicker is the intro to the title track. For no particular reason, Rhoads plays twenty-five seconds of the Doors' "Spanish Caravan." It's not central to the album (or even to the song), but it's *neat*. It's the kind of decision that all the guitar hacks who followed him never seemed to make.

I realize that Rhoads tends to get lionized because he died, and it's very possible that these records seem so remarkable simply because we are left with nothing else (except for a few early Quiet Riot demos). But this is very good rock music, and that has nothing to do with any plane crashes. (**Jack Factor: \$1,000**)

Mötley Crüe, *Too Fast for Love* (1982, Elektra): Perhaps you're wondering why I'm including this album instead of *Shout at the Devil*, the Crüe record I so aggressively pimped in the opening pages of this book. Well, two reasons: for one thing, I'm sick of talking about *Shout*, and—quite frankly—this is a better LP

I've never been too crazy about the popular opener "Live Wire," a song Motley still plays in every concert. However, I adore "Come On and Dance" (even though it's almost impossible to dance to) and "Public Enemy #1" (even though the lyrics never mention what atrocity our antagonist supposedly committed). *Too Fast for Love* was originally released by the band independently on Lethur Records (they tossed them into club audiences while Nikki Sixx's boots burned), and the Elektra re-release still seems a little cheap; Vince Neil's vocals sound shallow, and at least in this instance it's not his fault. The guitars all sound like they're made of tin, but that gives everything an aluminum sheen. Light metal (or metal lite), I suppose.

The strength of *Too Fast* is the stylized trashiness; it's the Crüe at their glammiest and (one hopes) most sincere. Still, the crafty marketing of Nikki Sixx is already obvious: The cover art is such a rote *Sticky Fingers* rip-off that it qualifies as an homage—but almost none of its intended audience had ever seen the original! As a selling tool, Vince Neil's crotch worked *exactly* the same way Warhol groupie Jed Johnson's did. Just like the music, it was old material that seemed completely fresh to thirteen-year-old kids with no sense of history (like me, for example).

The title cut is probably the album's best rocker, while the closing ballad "On with the Show" is the finest slow song the band would ever make (it's twice as gut-wrenching as "Home Sweet Home," which basically means it's half as gut-wrenching as Big Star's "Holocaust" and one-tenth as effective as *Snoopy, Come Home*). The only misstep was the baffling exclusion of "Toast of the Town," the very first single Motley ever released (and in case

you're curious, the B-side was "Stick to Your Guns"). Fortunately, that track was reincluded on the '99 re-release.

It will be interesting to see how Motley Crue is eventually categorized by rock historians; I sometimes wonder if they'll end up being the '80s version of Nazareth or Foghat. They honestly deserve better. When you place heavy metal in a cultural context, *Too Fast for Love* is the kind of album that kind-of-sortof matters. Whenever you forget what made glam metal so ridiculously popular, listen to this record. This is what happened when four Hollywood hobos got it right. (Jack Factor: \$1,333)

Guns N' Roses, *Appetite for Destruction* (1987, Geffen): Well, this is pretty much it.

Appetite for Destruction is the singular answer to the question, "Why did hair metal need to exist?" After all the coke and the car wrecks and the screaming and the creaming and the musical masturbation and the pentagrams and the dead hookers, this is what we are left with—the best record of the 1980s, regardless of genre. If asked to list the ten best rock albums of all time, this is the only pop metal release that might make the list; it's certainly the only Reagan-era material that can compete with the White Album and *Rumours* and *Electric Warrior*. *Appetite for Destruction* is an *Exile on Main Street* for all the kids born in '72, except *Appetite* rocks harder and doesn't get boring in the middle. It bastardizes every early Aerosmith record, but all the lyrics are smarter and Axl is a better dancer.

Part of the credit for the success of this five-headed juggernaut has to go to Nigel Dick, the faceless fellow who directed all the videos for GNR'S early singles. One needs to remember that *Appetite* was out for almost a year before it cracked the *Billboard* Top 10 in 1988. Most people assume that this was because of the single "Sweet Child O' Mine," but the real reason was the video for "Welcome to the Jungle." The first fifteen seconds of that vid explain everything we need to know: Axl gets off a bus in downtown L.A. with a piece of friggin' hay in his mouth (and evidently, he didn't do much chewing during the twenty-six-hour bus ride from Indiana, because it still looks pretty fresh). The first time I heard this song, I was riding the Octopus at the North Dakota State Fair in Minot, and I had no idea what the fuck it was supposed to be about—but I still kinda liked it. When I saw this video two months later, I realized that Axl wasn't welcoming me to the jungle, people were welcoming *him*. Suddenly, the

whole album made a lot more sense: Axl Rose was screaming because he was scared.

From the brazen misogyny of “It’s So Easy” to the pleading vulnerability of “Rocket Queen,” the album is a relentless exercise in high-concept sleaze. “Nightrain” is my personal favorite; Axl insists he’s “one bad mutha,” and he proves it by waking up his whore and making her buy four-dollar wine with her Visa card. “Mr. Brownstone” is hard funk on hard drugs, and it cleverly tells us how rock stars are supposed to live—you wake up at seven, you get out of bed at nine, and you always take the stage two hours late. “Paradise City” is probably the musical high point; it has GNR’s signature soft-heavy-soft vocal sequence and the best chorus in metal history. “Paradise City” still seems like a disco classic waiting to happen.

The flip side is a little dirtier, starting with the unsettling “My Michele” and the semisweet “Think About You.” The material is dark and purposefully hidden (kind of like Slash’s eyes, I suppose), and the drums are ferocious; it sounds like Steven Adler is setting off cherry bombs in his drum kit. And through it all, the guitar playing is stellar. On *Appetite for Destruction*, Slash invented a new style of playing that’s best described as “blues punk.” He simultaneously sounds raw and polished—the master craftsman who came to work loaded. It was a style that sold 15 million records, but almost nobody managed to copy it (including Slash, who never really got it right again—even when he consciously tried on 1993’s *The Spaghetti Incident?*).

There are those who will argue that the best thing that could have happened to Guns N’ Roses would have been death, probably in about 1991. They were certainly on the right path (in fact, the rumor persists that David Geffen wanted *Use Your Illusion* to be a double album because he suspected someone in the band would be dead before they could cut anything else). From a romantic (read: selfish) perspective, there’s some truth to this argument; it would be nice if *Appetite for Destruction* was all we really knew about this band of gypsies; Axl would have never lost his hair and the Gunners would have never become such bloated disasters.

Since Rose legally obtained the rights to the name Guns N’ Roses in 1991, GNR is Axl Rose for all practical (and impractical) purposes. Put Axl onstage with the starting five of the Quad City Thunder, and that qualifies as “the new Guns N’ Roses.” The group still exists, but it’s almost like

comparing Jefferson Airplane to Starship: As I write this, the ever-evolving lineup consists of Axl, Dizzy Reed, former Replacements' bassist Tommy Stinson, Buckethead (a robot-obsessed guitar freak who wears a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket on his dome), Robin Finck of Nine Inch Nails, Brian "Brain" Mantia (the drummer from Primus who replaced Josh Freese, the guy from the Vandals who played on the new Guns record but has also quit the band since the album's completion), and what amounts to Axl's buddies from high school. The next album's working title is *Chinese Democracy* and it's rumored to be aggressive industrial metal in the spirit of Led Zeppelin, filtered through the sensibilities of Stevie Wonder; I can only imagine what this will be like, although it's safe to assume it will be twice as good as Izzy Stradlin and the Ju Ju Hounds, three times as good as Slash's Snakepit, and five hundred times better than anything Duff McKagan ever released. But it will never be as good as this, and I suspect Axl^{*} knows it. **(Jack Factor: \$5,001)**

*Driving around aimlessly and going nowhere is an aspect of small-town culture few people from urban communities truly understand, but it's pretty much the backbone of teen life in places like Wyndmere. We drove our parents' cars around the same path endlessly for several hours every weekend evening: The route ran from the Cenex station, north to Main Street (where you made a U-turn in front of the bankrupt lumberyard), down the residential stretch of Highway 18 for about a mile, east past the Tastee Freez (and through the town's only stop light), and then back to Cenex. The total distance of one rotation is 2.8 miles. Whenever you wanted to talk to someone in another car, you hit your brake lights twice when they passed you, which indicated that they were supposed to meet you in the parking lot of the high school bus barn. The fundamental goal was to make the local police officer follow your particular vehicle, which is why I'll always begrudgingly adore that Gin Blossoms song where the dude sings, "We can drive around this town / And let the cops chase us around."

*This analysis was somewhat complicated by the May 11, 2000, issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, which essentially described Rose as a nocturnal New Age freak who spends much of his time in Sedona, a pseudo-spiritual Narnia in the Arizona desert. The article implied Chinese Democracy will probably never be released, but I'm confident it will eventually come out—however, I have no clue when that will be. When I started writing this manuscript in 1998, I jokingly said I wanted to have it published before the next GNR record, and (at this point) I think I still have a legitimate shot. Meanwhile, my aforementioned buddy Mr. Pancake now lives near Sedona and told me he'd keep an eye out for Axl's aura.

Appetite for Replication

She is not a beautiful woman.

She is not necessarily repulsive, I suppose, but no one is going to suspect this woman is an upstart actress or an aspiring model. One assumes there aren't a lot of actresses or models in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and one assumes even fewer would be working in a roadside café at 5:55 A.M. on Saturday morning. But for the next ten minutes, this aging red-haired woman is being treated like the foxiest rock chick in Appalachia. For a few post-dawn moments on this particular Saturday, she might as well be Tawny Kitaen.

"Do you like Guns N' Roses?" asks Randy Trask, the bespectacled twenty-eight-year-old who talks more than the other five people at the table combined. "We're a Guns N' Roses tribute band. I'm Axl. We're doing a show tonight in Harrisonburg. You gotta come. It's only like four hours away. Bring all your girlfriends. It's going to be *insane*. They love us in Harrisonburg. But I need to see you there. I'm the singer. I play Axl."

The waitress blushes like a middle-school crossing guard and calls Trask a sweetheart. She tells us that she can't come to the show because her grandfather is dying, and you can tell she's not lying. In a weird way, this might be flirting. When she leaves to fetch our pancakes, Trask glows like the MTV logo, circa 1988. Before we leave the restaurant, he will give this not-so-anorexic waitress a hug and aggressively declare that we will stop back to see her on our way home tomorrow afternoon.

"Exit 175. Remember that. This restaurant is off Exit 175," he says when we crawl back into the pickup. "What did I tell you? There's just something about me and redheads."

• • •

In truth, Mr. Trask should *be* a redhead. His overt blondness— along with the fact that he's six-foot-four—makes him look more like David Lee Roth than W. Axl Rose, and he knows it. "I am going to dye my hair red. That is definitely in the works," he says. "It's just that the last time I tried, it turned

sort of pink. And for some reason, people get scared of you when you have red hair. I don't know why that it is, but it's true. They just don't warm up to you the way they do if you're blond."

Trask tells me this at ten minutes to midnight while we sit in his 1997 extended-cab Ford Ranger pickup, which we will drive from Cincinnati to northern Virginia for tomorrow night's rock show. It's roughly a ten-hour drive, so leaving in the middle of the night should get us to town just in time to check into the Hampton Inn for an afternoon nap. There is some concern about this, because the last time Trask and his band mates in Paradise City were in Harrisonburg they were banned for life from the Econo Lodge. This weekend, they need to make sure things go smoothly at the Hampton; there just aren't that many hotels in Harrisonburg.

Our pickup is sitting outside the home of Paul Dischner, and the engine is idling. Like Trask, Dischner is striving to be someone else; he's supposed to be Izzy Stradlin, Guns N' Roses original rhythm guitar player. In the band Paradise City, everybody is supposed to be someone else. That's the idea.

"I initially had a problem with the idea of doing a Guns N' Roses tribute, because I didn't want anyone to think I was discrediting Axl. That was always my main concern. If Axl was somehow against this, I'd straight up quit. I would never do this if he disapproved," Trask says. "But I really think we can do his songs justice. People constantly tell me, 'You sound better than Axl,' but I always say, 'Whoa now, slow down.' Because I like the way I sing Axl's songs, but I *love* the way Axl sings them. That's the main thing I'm concerned about with this article: I do not want this to say anything negative about Guns N' Roses. That's all I ask."

I am the first reporter who has ever done a story on Paradise City. This is less a commentary on Paradise City and more a commentary on the tribute band phenomenon, arguably the most universally maligned sector of rock 'n' roll. These are bands mired in obscurity and engaged in a bizarrely postmodern zerosum game: If a tribute band were to completely succeed, its members would no longer have personalities. They would have no character whatsoever, beyond the qualities of whomever they tried to emulate. The goal is not to be somebody; the goal is be somebody else.

Though the Beatles and Elvis Presley were the first artists to spawn impersonators, the modern tribute template was mostly set by groups like Strutter, Hotter than Hell, and Cold Gin, all of whom toured in the early nineties by looking, acting, and singing like the 1978 version of KISS. It

worked a little better than anyone could have expected: People would sooner pay \$10 to see four guys pretending to be KISS than \$5 to see four guys playing original songs nobody had ever heard before. And club owners understand money. There are now hundreds—probably thousands—of rock bands who make a living by method acting. There's the Atomic Punks, a Van Halen tribute that celebrates the band's Roth era. Battery is a tribute to Metallica. Planet Earth are L.A. based Duran Duran clones. Bjorn Again claims to be Australia's finest ABBA tribute. AC/DShe is an all-female AC/DC cover group from San Francisco. There are tributes to groups who never seemed that popular to begin with (Badfinger, Thin Lizzy, Dream Theater), and there are tributes to bands who are not altogether difficult to see for real (The Dave Matthews Band, Creed). And though rock critics deride Stone Temple Pilots and Oasis for ripping off other artists, drunk people in rural bars pay good money to see tribute bands rip off Stone Temple Pilots and Oasis as accurately as possible.

And being consciously derivative is not easy.

Trask and Dischner can talk for hours about the complexity of feeding their appetite for replication. Unlike starting a garage band, there are countless caveats that must be fulfilled when auditioning potential members for a tribute. This was especially obvious when Paradise City had to find a new person to play Slash, GNR's signature lead guitarist. It is not enough to find a guy who plays the guitar well; your Slash needs to sound like Slash. He needs to play a Les Paul, and he needs to tune it like Slash. He needs to have long black hair that hangs in his face and a \$75 top hat. Preferably, he should have a dark complexion, an emaciated physique, and a willingness to play shirtless. And if possible, he should drink Jack Daniel's on stage.

The Slash in Paradise City fulfills about half of those requirements.

"Bobby is on thin ice right now, and he knows he's on thin ice," says Trask, referring to lead guitarist Bobby Young. "I mean, he's an okay guy, and he's a good guitar player. But we have ads out right now for a new Slash, and he knows that. I want someone who is *transfixed* with being Slash. We want someone who is as sick about Slash as I am about Axl."

What's ironic about Young's shortcomings as Slash is that—in a traditional band—his job would likely be the most secure: He is clearly the most skilled musician in Paradise City, having received a degree from Cincinnati's Conservatory of Music in 1987 (that was the same year GNR

debuted with the album *Appetite for Destruction*). “I was classically trained, so I’m used to everything being built around minor chords,” he tells me. “But Slash plays almost everything in a major chord, and his soloing is very different than mine. It’s not in chromatic keys. I really thought I could learn all of these Guns N’ Roses songs in two days, but it took me almost two weeks.”

Unfortunately, Young can’t learn how to look like a mulatto exheroin addict, and this is the only occupation in America for which that is a job requirement. He only vaguely resembles Slash, and his band mates tease him about being akin to an Oompa Loompa from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. There’s a similar problem with Paradise City’s bassist; he’s portrayed by an affable, laidback blond named Spike, but Spike is built a little too much like a farmer. His shoulders are broad, and he actually looks more like Larry Bird than Duff McKagan. Amazingly, Spike is also partially deaf from playing heavy metal for so many years (he can’t hear certain frequencies, including feedback), but—somehow—that doesn’t pose a problem.

Visually, the rest of Paradise City succeeds at varying degrees. Drummer Rob “The Monster” Pohlman could pass for Steven Adler if Pohlman hadn’t just shaved his head and dyed his remaining locks orange, a move that completely baffles Dischner.¹ The fact that he hides behind a drum kit, however, substantially mitigates this problem. Trask is eight inches too tall, but he has the voice and—more importantly—the desire. He wills himself into Axlocity.

Dischner is the only Paradise City member who naturally looks like a GNR doppelgänger. He’s also the guy who makes the trains run on time; he handles the money, coordinates the schedules, and generally keeps his bandmates from killing each other. All of these guys are friendly, but Dischner is the most relentlessly nice. He’s also mind-blowingly idiosyncratic. Prior to Paradise City, Dischner played in an Yngwie Malmsteen–influenced band called Premonition, a group whose entire existence was based on the premise that the Antichrist is Juan Carlos, the King of Spain.² To this day, Dischner adheres to this theory and claims it can be proven through biblical prophecy. He lives with his wife (an aspiring vampire novelist) in a small suburb of Cincinnati, and he peppers his conversation with a high-pitched, two-note laugh that sounds like “Wee

Hee!” Over the next thirty-six hours, he will make that sound approximately four hundred times.

When we leave from Dischner’s house at 12:30 A.M., it has already been an incredibly long day for Trask. He awoke Friday morning at 2:00 A.M. at his home in Ravenna, Ohio, and immediately drove four hours to the outskirts of Cincinnati, where he spent the day cutting down a troublesome tree in Dischner’s front yard; Trask’s father runs a tree service in Northeast Ohio, so his son knows how to handle a chainsaw. After a brief afternoon nap, the band hooked up for a few hours of rehearsal before supper. Now it’s midnight, and Trask is preparing to drive the entire way to Virginia, nonstop. I have never met anyone who needs sleep less. Trask once drove twenty-two hours straight to Hayes, Kansas, and played a show immediately upon arrival. If the real Axl Rose had this kind of focus, Guns N’ Roses would have released fifteen albums by now.

There was a time when Paradise City had a tour bus, but they lost it last summer. This is not a euphemism; they literally can’t find it. It broke down on a trip to Kansas City, and they had to leave it in a Missouri garage to make it to the club on time. Somehow, they lost the business card of the garage and have never been able to recall its location. Dischner tells me this story three times before I realize he’s not joking.

“We drove back through Missouri a bunch of times, we put up a picture on our Web site, and we even called the Highway Patrol,” Dischner says. “But we lost the bus. And I guess there’s some law that states you only have thirty days to find your bus.”

As it is, the band is now traveling in two vehicles. Axl/Randy will pull the Haulmark trailer that contains their gear; he’ll drive the truck, I’ll ride shotgun, and Izzy/Paul will curl up in the extended cab. A friend of the band—some dude named Teddy— will follow in his Ford Mustang, which will also hold Slash/Bobby and Steven/Rob. The pickup box is covered with a topper, so Duff/Spike will lay back in the truck bed with Punky.

Trask and Dischner do not know who Punky is.

They’ve only met Punky a few times, and they don’t know his last name (or his real first name). They are told that Punky is friends with Teddy and Young, all of whom are evidently longtime running buddies. Young is thirty-six, which is a little older than Trask (twenty-eight), Dischner (thirty-

one), and Pohlman (twenty-nine). Nobody knows how old Spike is and he refuses to say; a good guess might be forty.

Our last stop before hitting the highway is Spike's home in Clifton, Ohio, a few scant miles from the site of Cincinnati's recent race riots. Spike's house is terrifying. It appears completely dilapidated, but—supposedly—it's actually being renovated. The home contains a python, several large birds, two alligators in the bathtub, and the most bloodthirsty Rottweiler in North America (Dischner gives me four full minutes of instruction about how to safely *walk past* this animal). Spike deals exotic animals in his spare time; nobody but me seems to find this unusual.

At departure time, only 40 percent of the band is not under the influence of some kind of chemical. Twenty minutes into the trip, that percentage will fall to zero. Even before we get on the road, this Punky character looks drunk enough to die; amazingly, he's just getting started. They're *all* just getting started. Everyone is smoking pot, and it's the second-strongest dope I've ever inhaled: I keep looking through the windshield, and the vehicle seems to be moving much faster than it should be. It feels like we're driving down an extremely steep incline, but the earth remains flat. I am not the type who normally gets paranoid, but this is a bit disturbing. I'm trying very hard to act cool, but I start thinking too much; in order to relax, I smoke another half joint, which (of course) never works. I start imaging that we're going to crash and that my death is going to be reported as some sort of predictable irony—I will forever be remembered as the guy who wrote a book about heavy metal bands who were mostly fake and then died while touring with a heavy metal band that was *completely* fake. I start having hallucinations of elk running out in front of the vehicle, and I notice that Trask isn't even watching the road when he talks to me. Finally, I can't take it anymore. I politely turn to Trask and Dischner and make the following announcement: "Okay—now, don't take this the wrong way, because I'm probably just nuts, and I'm probably just too fucked up to know what's going on, and I'm probably overreacting for no valid reason, and I hate to sound unreasonable or immature, and I don't want to sound pretentious, but elks are prevalent. And perhaps this is out of line and I'm certainly open to debate on this issue, but I need to go on record and say that I am not 100 percent comfortable with the situation regarding this truck at the moment, because I have a feeling that we are all going to die."

“Dude,” Trask tells me. “I *totally* wish I could trade bodies with you right now.”

It remains to be seen if these guys can sound like Guns N’ Roses, but they clearly have their self-destructive aspirations deftly mastered.

Our vehicles barrel into the darkness of Kentucky, loaded like a freight train and flyin’ like an aero-plane. Spike and Punky are freezing in the box of the pickup, and they try to stay warm by drinking more Bud Light. Inside the toasty cab, faux-Axl and faux-Izzy have straightened up (slightly), and we’re discussing the question most people have about tribute bands, which is “Why do you possibly do this?” It seems antithetical to the whole concept of art; the notion of creativity has been completely removed from the equation. Wouldn’t the members of Paradise City be happier if they could write their own songs, dress however they want, and—quite simply—be themselves?

No.

“Obviously, being in an original band is the ultimate dream, but it mostly sucks,” Dischner says. “You don’t get to tour. You don’t get no money. You have to beg your own friends to come to the show. But being a mock star is awesome.”

Paradise City will earn \$1,100 for the Harrisonburg show. After their manager takes his 15 percent and they pay for gas and promotions, they will be left with \$655, which—split between five people—ends up being \$131 each. This is almost nothing. But the operative word is “almost.” If these same five guys in Paradise City performed their own material, they would have to pay to play in most reputable clubs; as a tribute band, they can live as “professional musicians.” Relatively speaking, \$1,100 is good money.

“The thing about being in a tribute band is that your fans already exist,” Trask says. “You show up at the bar, and there’s immediately a few hundred people who love Guns N’ Roses and therefore love you.”

This is not always true. A month later, Paradise City will play a show at a club called Dr. Feelgood’s in the desperate lake town of Conneaut, Ohio, and virtually no one will notice; the bar’s billiard tables will have more spectators than the stage, and the owner won’t even give them free beer until they finish the first set. It’s a bit uncomfortable for everyone involved, but not really humbling or tragic: No one in Paradise City seems confused about the social significance of this group.

“I never think of myself as Axl Rose, and we don’t think of ourselves as Guns N’ Roses,” Trask says. “Our fans are Guns N’ Roses fans—they’re not really fans of Paradise City. We’re not deluding ourselves.”

And in a way, somber nights in ghost towns like Conneaut validate their cred; Paradise City almost seems to enjoy adversity. They love talking about how “life on the road” is a hard-yet-satisfying experience. They give “tribute quotes” that sound like outtakes from VH1’s *Behind the Music*: It’s all about the fans, it’s all about the music, it’s all about the awe-inspiring majesty of rock; it’s all about something, and then it’s all about something else entirely. But they’re never lying—in tribute bands, all those clichés are true. Paradise City cares more about Guns N’ Roses than the original members of Guns N’ Roses care about the song “Paradise City.”

In fact, the guys in Paradise City seem to care about *all* music with more enthusiasm than any group of musicians I’ve ever encountered. There is no elitism. As we roll toward West Virginia, the truck’s stereo never plays an artist they dislike. They have positive things to say about Aerosmith, Nickelback, Celine Dion (!), Black Sabbath, White Lion, Pink Floyd, and Alabama. When Jewel’s “You Were Meant for Me” comes on the radio, Dischner mentions that the song always makes him wish it were raining; ten minutes later, he tells me that Rush is “just about the greatest three-piece band ever,” and then gives a similar compliment to the Rush tribute band 2112.

We fly through the West Virginia border at 4:04 A.M. This is a strange part of the country, but perhaps an ideal place for a group trying to re-create 1988: On the same FM station that played Jewel and Rush, two early morning DJs are unironically joking about Julia Roberts’s relationship with Lyle Lovett.

After getting breakfast from the aforementioned redhead in White Sulphur Springs, we get back on the road (doomed to complete the voyage while driving into the rising sun). After hitting the Virginia state line, Trask begins scanning all the radio stations in the hope of hearing “The Commercial.” This is a radio spot promoting Paradise City’s concert at the Mainstreet Bar & Grill. The band gets excited about hearing “The Commercial” in the same way normal bands get excited about hearing their first single on the radio; for a tribute group, exposure equals success. When

we finally hear said advertisement, it refers to Paradise City's "triumphant return" to Virginia. High-fives are exchanged all around.

I want to talk about the real Guns N' Roses for a while, and Trask is more than willing to oblige. Though he admits that his first musical love was Mötley Crüe (before Paradise City, he fronted a Mötley tribute called Bastard), one cannot deny his sincere adoration for GNR, a band whose legacy is—to be fair—problematic. Guns N' Roses debuted as L.A.'s most dangerous band in 1987, blowing the doors off pop metal with *Appetite for Destruction*, arguably the strongest debut album in rock history. They followed with an EP titled *GNR Lies*, which is best remembered for the ballad "Patience" and the controversial "One in a Million,"³ a track that managed to be racist, homophobic, and xenophobic in just over six scant minutes. Two years later, the Gunners released two massive albums on the same day, *Use Your Illusion I* and *II*, cementing their place as the biggest band in the world. Yet by 1997, all had collapsed; one by one, every member—except the mercurial Axl Rose—either quit or was fired. Rose became a virtual recluse for almost a decade, endlessly working on his alleged masterpiece, *Chinese Democracy*, and earnestly growing dreadlocks.

I ask my traveling partners if they're concerned about what will happen when *Chinese Democracy* eventually hits stores. It's a paradoxical problem: If the album does well and Rose tours, it could decrease the demand for a GNR tribute; if the album flops, it might make the concept of a GNR "tribute" vaguely ridiculous. But Trask and Dischner aren't worried. They're confident there will always be a demand for the original incarnation of Guns N' Roses, and that can only be experienced through their show. History is not an issue for these people; for them, the past is not different than the present, and the future will be identical. Every year, Axl Rose grows a little older, but Paradise City never ages beyond the summer of '91.

We arrive at the Hampton Inn parking lot just before 11 A.M. The girl at the front desk is a little overweight, but she has a nice smile. Trask is impressed. "Do you like Guns N' Roses?" he asks her. "We're a Guns N' Roses tribute band. I'm Axl. You should come to the show tonight at the Mainstreet. It's going to be crazy. They love us here."

In a few hours, members of the Paradise City entourage will have lunch at a nearby Long John Silver's. A total stranger will ask Punky if they're in

a band. When Punky replies “Sort of,” the man will ask him, “Are you guys Molly Hatchet?”

There are no “fashion don’ts” inside the Mainstreet Bar & Grill in downtown Harrisonburg. You want to inexplicably wear a headband? Fine. You want to wear a FUBU sweatshirt with a baseball hat that features the Confederate flag? No problem. This is the kind of place where you will see a college girl attempting to buy a \$2.25 glass of Natural Light on tap with her credit card— *and have her card denied*.

Certainly, the Mainstreet is not trendy. But it’s still cool, or at least interesting, and Paradise City has sold it out. Almost five hundred people (mostly kids from nearby James Madison University) have paid \$12 to get inside, which is as many as the Mainstreet will draw for next week’s Dokken show. One can only wonder how the real guys in Dokken feel about being as popular as five fake guys in Guns N’ Roses.

The opening act is a local collegiate jam band called Alpine Recess; they look like they’d rather be opening for a Phish tribute, but the crowd is polite. Meanwhile, Paradise City is dressing downstairs in the basement,⁴ drinking free Budweiser in the storeroom, and leaning against the water heater. They have decided to open with the song “Night Train,” even though the tune includes an extended five-minute guitar solo that Young fears might anesthetize the audience.

Unlike the real GNR, Paradise City hits the stage exactly on time. However, things are not perfect: There are sound problems on “Night Train” that can only be described as cataclysmic, and Trask glares at the soundman. But things get better. Things get tighter. Trask moves his hips in Axl’s signature snakelike sway, and the crowd sings along with everything. Paradise City may not always look like Guns N’ Roses, but they certainly sound like them; when I go to the bathroom and hear the music through a wooden door, it’s impossible not to imagine that this is how it would have sounded to urinate on the Sunset Strip in 1986.

“This next song is dedicated to everybody who ever told you how to live,” Trask tells us as he prowls the twenty-five-foot-stage in his kilt. “This is for everybody who told you not to smoke weed or not to drink beer every day. There are just too many people who make life too hard.”

This soliloquy leads into the bubbling bass intro of “It’s So Easy,” the angriest three minutes off *Appetite for Destruction*. Girls begin crawling on

stage to dance on top of the amplifiers, and the band couldn't be happier. Ultimately, this is why they do this: They're literally paying tribute to the music of Guns N' Roses, but they're figuratively paying tribute to the Guns N' Roses Lifestyle. They're totally willing to become other people, as long as those people party all the time, live like gypsies, and have pretty girls dancing on their amplifiers. This is precisely why guys create rock bands; Paradise City just created somebody else's.

"I'm not pretending to be a Guns N' Roses fan," says Kelly Gony, a stunning twenty-two-year-old history major who danced on stage in her cut-off denim skirt for the last forty-five minutes of the show. "I just think they did an excellent job. Maybe some of the people in the crowd were clapping for Guns N' Roses, but there also might have been some people clapping about the fact that these guys can act exactly like Guns N' Roses. I mean, look at me—I'm dressed like it's 1988. It's just fun, you know?"

This blue-eyed girl is correct—it *is* fun, although not so fun that she accepts the band's offer to go back to their hotel. Gony goes home. However, a few females (most of whom seem *very* young) agree to go back to the Hampton for a few dozen night caps and more weed. I assume the goal is to have sex with them, although I don't think this works out for anybody, except possibly Spike. Punky sporadically asks these girls to remove their tank tops, and—although they never actually do—they don't seem particularly offended by the request.

I hang with Paradise City until around 3:30 A.M.. Part of me thinks that I should really try to party with them all night, because perhaps that's when things will truly get insane. Maybe there will be a transcendent moment, complete with speedballs and hookers and an albino musk ox. But the larger part of me is tired and drunk and stoned, so I go to bed (luckily, I have my own room). The next morning, I see Dischner in the lobby and ask him how the rest of the night went; he tells me nothing really happened. I ask the same question when I run into Bobby Young, and he spends ten minutes telling me how the girls who came back to the hotel were nothing but "brain-dead cock teases." He thought the evening sucked.

But not Randy.

Trask is sitting at the wheel of his truck, ready to drive us home on three hours rest. His version of the night is quite different. "It was a madhouse," he tells me unspecifically, neither lying nor telling the truth. "You should

have stayed up with us, Chuck. It was unbelievable. I'm serious. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

I nod. I agree. One way or the other, we all use our illusions. And I'm sure Axl would completely approve.

1. Three days before Pohlman's haircut, Dischner had told me that "What sets us apart from the other twenty-two Guns N' Roses tribute bands in America is that we don't wear wigs." This new development with Pohlman's scalp was not to his liking.

[2](#). Premonition's two singles, "He Is Rising" and "Mr. Heroin," were both (presumably) about Carlos and allegedly charted in Greece.

3. The last time Paradise City performed in Harrisonburg, they received a death threat from two Middle Eastern patrons after playing “One in a Million.” Over the course of the weekend, this story is breathlessly recounted to me six times.

[4](#). During the Paradise City set, Punky will lay on the dressing room's concrete floor after falling down a flight of stairs. Though he will continue to postparty with the band for most of the night, Punky will need to be rushed to the hospital by ambulance the following morning when—upon finally sobering up—he will realize he has broken his wrist. Oddly (or perhaps predictably), the band will simply leave him in Harrisonburg and drive back to Ohio.

Deep Blue Something

When you're on a cruise ship, you eat supper every night in the same restaurant, at the same table, with the same people. It's assigned seating, so you end up forging this strange little relationship with total strangers. I took a cruise that was not filled to capacity, so my eight-chaired table was half-empty: it was me, my long-distance girlfriend (Melissa), and a middle-aged couple from Florida. I had just started dating my girlfriend semi-seriously; this cruise was the first time we had ever spent more than a weekend together. The Floridian couple, Peter and Linda, were in their early fifties. Peter was this big, blustery gray-haired guy who worked for Clear Channel as a salesman. He was the type of salesman who was *always* a salesman, even when he was asking for more ice water. I think he ate steak every night we were there. Linda was mousy and almost too thin; she was a lawyer who worked in social services. Linda ate salad, logged several hours a day on a treadmill, and did not possess the potential to be unfriendly. They were both divorced, having met on a blind date. The first night we ate together, the conversation was a little uncomfortable: I would estimate that Peter talked 75 percent of the time, I talked 20 percent of the time, Melissa spoke 3 percent of the time, and Linda uttered four sentences. Peter would occasionally talk over Linda, and this annoyed my girlfriend. However, the more time we spent with these two people, the more Melissa and I liked them. They talked about their kids, and about their previous marriages, and about what they had learned about human nature through their respective careers. Peter *really* loved talking about the radio advertising business. He was naturally domineering, but it was clear that he adored Linda, and it was also obvious that Linda found Peter's charismatic filibustering deeply charming. Every night after we excused ourselves from the table, Melissa and I would walk back to our cabin and break down the night's conversation, analyzing the subtext to everything Peter and Linda said. "Did you see Linda raise her eyebrows when Peter mentioned her ex-husband?" Melissa would note. "Indeed I did," I would respond. "But did you notice how Peter keeps going out of his way to remind us that Linda is more educated than he is?" Melissa and I didn't add much personality to

these meals; we were more like relationship spectators. It was like being inside a Raymond Carver story.

However, that changed during the last meal we ate with Peter and Linda. Much to our surprise, it seems Peter and Linda found our interaction even more intense than we did theirs; they told Melissa and I that our casual nightly dinners had been “the highlight of the trip.” And even more surprising, they suddenly urged Melissa to move from Minneapolis to New York so that the two of us could be together, because they were certain we were deeply in love and that our respective jobs meant nothing when compared to the life we could share together. And this wasn’t drunk talk; this was sincere, openhearted, maternal advisement. They seemed to know details about our relationship that we had never told them, and perhaps that we were not even aware of. And what I slowly realized was that—while Melissa and I (half-jokingly) studied Peter and Linda’s interaction as some kind of potential, implausible future—Peter and Linda (quite seriously) saw our present existence as a past they could have experienced, had only they met twenty years earlier.

I have no idea whatever happened to those people, but I kind of love them. They also drove us to the airport after we docked in Miami, so that was convenient.

That '70s Cruise (March 2005)

“Welcome to the most unusual show Styx has ever played!”

The man yelling this phrase is dressed like a sailor, except that he's also wearing a T-shirt advocating the defunct Soviet Union beneath a red sports coat. He's dressed, I suppose, a lot like former Styx singer Dennis DeYoung, although I'm not sure if DeYoung was also an ironic communist. The man's name is Lawrence Gowan, whom you've probably never heard of until you read this particular sentence; six hours ago, I hadn't heard of him, either. But Mr. Gowan knows a lot about the history of Styx; he is, in fact, the current lead singer and keyboardist for Styx. He just sang “The Grand Illusion.” And even though he's only been a member of the band for one-sixth of its thirty-three-year existence, I suspect Gowan's correct about the degree to which this particular concert is “unusual,” since Styx is—in all likelihood—the first classic-rock band ever to perform a concert on a Carnival cruise ship.

The 2004 incarnation of Styx plays on, and they are a heavily goateed band. Guitarist Tommy Shaw, fifty-one, has evolved into a super-furry animal over the past two decades, but his face is still boyish; he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of Chuck Taylors, so he looks like what would happen if Jimmy Buffet went through a skater phase. Second guitarist James “JY” Young, fifty-five, is similarly furry and dressed like ... well, like someone who's playing in a rock band at the age of fifty-five. The unfamous bass player has a cheetah-print shirt and blond highlights; the unfamous drummer looks completely normal and very, very happy to be playing drums. All five band members are being pelted with panties while they jam, but almost all of the lingerie is being thrown by the same woman; she has evidently hauled a duffel bag of women's underwear into the concert venue. I don't think most of these panties belong to her (or—if they do—she hasn't worn them since 1986). The crowd is losing its collective mind. They love it. We love it. And even if we didn't, there's not much we could do: we're a hundred miles from dry land, floating through international waters, listening to an eighteen-song Styx medley that briefly

includes “Mr. Roboto.” We are watching a rock concert on a boat. Tomorrow, we will watch another, and that group will be REO Speedwagon; on Friday, we will watch Journey. Seven long days, three arcane bands, one deep ocean. This kind of thing has never been done before. However, it will probably be done again, because everyone involved seems to be absolutely ecstatic.

There are elements to seeing Styx (or any artist, probably) on a cruise ship that are vastly unlike the typical concert experience. Sometimes the boat will (very slightly) pitch or roll or yaw, and I can see Tommy Shaw transfer all his weight onto his right leg while his left hand slides down the neck of his axe; it must be hard to rock an audience when you’re being involuntarily rocked by water. The band is now playing a song called “Snowblind,” which Young prefaced by alluding to a recent football game between the Denver Broncos and the Oakland Raiders. I can think of at least two other hard-rock songs titled “Snowblind,” and this seems to be the only one that is not about cocaine. It doesn’t matter: the aforementioned panty-packing woman throws a bra at Young, and he hangs it from his guitar. With the possible exception of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, I have never seen an audience like anything as much as these middle-aged cruise patrons like Styx. And what’s even crazier is that I think they like Journey more.

Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with me ...

Two days after Thanksgiving, the Carnival ocean liner *Triumph* leaves Miami for seven days, scheduled to loop around Cuba and make one-day stops in Cozumel, the Cayman Islands, and Jamaica. This is a standard cruise itinerary. However, this particular voyage is different; this particular trip includes the presence of three bands who have not been famous since the introduction of New Coke. On Monday afternoon, Styx will conduct a casual “question-and-answer” session in the ship’s thousand-seat lounge and then perform that evening in the same intimate location. On Tuesday, REO Speedwagon will follow suit with their own conversation and concert. A friendly Q&A session with Journey is set for Thursday afternoon, but they’re not playing until Friday night, hours before we redock in Florida.

There are over 2,500 people on the *Triumph* (an unofficial figure provided by my Croatian cruise waiter, Zeljko), but—sadly—they will not all be allowed to rock. Only about 1,000 of the 2,500 have purchased the

“Rock Cruise” package. The economics of this trip are profoundly confusing: prices for the rock cruise begin at \$1,299, which is roughly \$700 more than cruising without the rock. Some guests are paying as much as \$3,199, which means they get to sleep in a penthouse suite and are granted “platinum status” (which guarantees they’ll be able to meet all the bands backstage). However, some of the *Triumph*’s vacationers are getting a mind-blowing bargain; the rock portion of the cruise is being sponsored by media conglomerate Clear Channel, so Clear Channel employees can experience this trip for a scant \$249. I am told by a Clear Channel sales rep that this deal is supposed to be a secret, but everyone on the boat seems to be talking about it.

As I board the *Triumph* on Saturday afternoon, I immediately try to deduce which boat patrons view the three rock concerts as “incidental” to the cruising experience and which view them as “integral” to the cruising experience. While my passport is being examined, I casually explain to my traveling companion that some of these bands are now primarily comprised of replacement musicians, and that the current incarnation of Styx only includes two of its original members. “Not really,” interjects a bespectacled fortysomething woman waiting behind us in line. “Tommy Shaw didn’t officially join Styx until 1975, so there’s only one original member. And the drummer died, so you really can’t hold that against the rest of the band.”

I decide this woman can be safely placed in the “integral” category.

There are three main hurdles involved with the writing and reporting of this story. The first is that the definitive cruise story has already been written by David Foster Wallace, who published the essay “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” in 1995; this is evidently the most popular essay ever produced, as roughly six thousand people have mentioned it to me during the forty-eight hours prior to this trip. The second hurdle is my inability to swim, which means this trip could possibly kill me. The third (and strangest) hurdle is that Clear Channel decreed that I cannot interview any of the three musical outfits, nor can I actively participate in any of the Q&A sessions; apparently, the cruise is supposed to be a vacation for the bands, too.

In truth, talking to members of Journey doesn’t interest me that much; I much prefer chatting with my Croatian waiter, as he seems to know a great deal about international politics and international heavy metal. He bristles when I tell him I like KISS. “Oof,” guffaws Zeljko. “That is only show! ‘I

was made for loving you'? Oof. That is no rock. AC/DC is rock, but only from Bon Scott era, and maybe on *Back in Black*. Saxon, Judas Priest—these are the rock bands.”

Zeljko works on this Carnival cruise line because Serbians bombed his house during the '90s. Now he supports his wife and kids by refilling my glass with ice water and sending his paycheck across the Atlantic. This makes me so depressed that I briefly consider buying some Saxon records.

It's Wednesday afternoon. Ten minutes ago, I was inside a casino. I don't normally gamble, so this was strange. As I walked past the blackjack tables, I nearly collided with REO Speedwagon lead singer Kevin Cronin. I don't normally hang out with REO Speedwagon, so this was likewise strange.

I've now escaped the casino and I'm meandering across the luxury ship's upper deck, which is where I spot a forty-five-year-old man playing an electric guitar as he stares across the almost idiotic blueness of the Caribbean Sea. With the help of a manual called *Heavy Metal Guitar*, he is trying to figure out the introduction to “Stairway to Heaven.” His name is John Shipman, and he's a renaissance man: Shipman teaches high-school psychology in South Carolina, he spent the 1980s flying F-111 fighter jets for the Air Force, and—in his spare time—he runs a martial arts school that specializes in a style of street fighting called American kempo. Shipman is a fourth-degree kempo black belt; he tells me he has already become “like the tiger” and aspires to become “like the dragon.” This sounds like a good plan, and I hope he doesn't kick me in the neck. Eventually, I ask him why he and his wife decided to spend their unpaid vacation on the “Rock 'n' Roll Holiday Cruise.” And this is what he tells me.

“We felt it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” says Ship-man. “Styx is real hard-rocking. REO is great, especially in terms of ballads. Journey is more of a heartfelt, emotional band, but, of course, they also have the fantastic guitar work of Neal Schon.”

I agree with at least half of those sentiments. However, it still strikes me as strange that someone would want to experience these particular bands on a boat. It feels goofy to take a Caribbean cruise with REO Speedwagon. At risk of sounding reductionist, the whole idea just seems ... insane. But as Shipman and I chat about the evolution of guitar-driven rock, and as we discuss the mores and affinities of the high-school kids he teaches in South Carolina, I begin to understand why he (and his peers) are willing to sail

below the Tropic of Cancer to hear a song like “Separate Ways.” The people on this ship do not necessarily reflect the typical classic-rock fan base, nor do they serve as a rare collection of affluent white-trash party animals with archaic taste in music.

What they personify is half of an emerging generation gap.

These Carnival cruise patrons stand on one side of a philosophical chasm; demographically, the chasm can be quantified as the aesthetic abyss between (a) people born just before 1960, and (b) people born just after 1980. And what’s fascinating about this gap is that both sides love the same thing: they both love rock music. This is not a case of the youth embracing a completely new idiom their parents can’t fathom, because the idiom is essentially the same; this is a generation gap over *virtuosity*. Quite simply, the people on this cruise don’t believe modern bands know how to play, and they’re willing to spend \$2,500 to see groups who can.

“You hit the nail on the head,” Shipman says when I suggest this hypothesis. “I talk to my students about music all the time, and they’re all used to Britney Spears and Madonna and Janet Jackson and all those rap guys. That’s what they consider normal music. But those people are just talking over a beat and dancing—it has more to do with what they wear. It’s not like someone singing and playing guitar and writing all the material and running around the stage while they play it.”¹ It seems like kids today are more interested in the culture around music than in the music itself.”

There might be some grains of truth in what Shipman says. However, it’s possible that kids are more interested in the culture around music simply because that culture is always more interesting, and it always has been.

Or at least it was on this boat.

A little background information on the three bands involved with this cruise:

- **Styx:** Originally prog rockers who called themselves Tradewinds (and then briefly TW4), Styx broke into prominence with the ballad “Lady” in 1975. Their greatest success came from the concept albums *Paradise Theatre* in 1981 and *Kilroy Was Here* in 1983, the latter being a futuristic narrative about robots. This caused the band to disintegrate. Lead singer DeYoung portrayed Pontius Pilate in a Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, guitar messiah Shaw joined Damn Yankees during the

early '90s, and the entire posse reunited in '96 for a tour with Kansas. The reunion was short-lived; DeYoung immediately exited the band (for a third time, technically) and the remaining members (plus a few replacements) released an album in 2003 called *Cyclorama* with actor Billy Bob Thornton.

- **REO Speedwagon:** Though always seeming vaguely Canadian, REO was actually founded on the University of Illinois campus in 1968. The band made an artistic leap by adding Cronin as vocalist in 1972, whom they immediately fired in 1973. Cronin rejoined the group in '75 and success soon followed, peaking with 1980's *Hi-Infidelity* (which sold over nine million copies). The best-loved REO songs are 1974's "Ridin' the Storm Out," 1980's "Keep On Loving You," 1984's "Can't Fight This Feeling," and a handful of other songs that would prompt you to say things like, "Oh, I know this song, but I had no idea it was REO Speedwagon."

- **Journey:** Christened in 1973 (via a radio contest on KSAN-FM in San Francisco), Journey began as a primarily instrumental jazz collective. Steve Perry joined in 1977; by 1980, they were rich. In that ephemeral era between Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* and Van Halen's *1984*, it could be argued that Journey was the world's most popular arena rock band. However, Journey is not very good at remaining Journey. Perry left the group twice (once in 1986 and again in 1996) and released solo tracks like "Oh, Sherry." While on hiatus in the mid-'80s, guitarist Neal Schon and keyboardist Gregg Rolie formed a band with John Waite called Bad English. Eight years ago, a re-formed version of Journey added vocalist Steve Augeri, a man who sings like Steve Perry, looks like Steve Perry, talks like Steve Perry, and is (weirdly) even named "Steve."

Journey is, far and away, the most popular band on this cruise ship.

I spot two shirtless guys drinking low-carb Michelob Ultra and listening to Journey through a boom box on the ninth-floor sundeck. One of them, forty-five-year-old mechanical contractor Larry Zuccari, has seen Journey thirty-one times; his wedding song was the Journey ballad "Faithfully." However, his bride is not on this boat.

"Both our wives allow us to have this time to ourselves," Zuccari explains, gesturing to boyhood friend Bill Hagan. "We don't own bass boats. We don't bowl. We don't hang out in bars. We follow Journey. I saw

Journey perform at a Wet 'n' Wild amusement park next to a roller coaster in rural Georgia, so seeing them on a boat doesn't seem all that strange, relatively speaking. If you're a true fan of a band, it doesn't matter where that band plays—you just go. At this point, most of the rock shows I see are held in casinos.”

Like virtually everyone I talk to on board the *Triumph*,² Zuccari misses the day when groups like Journey were omnipresent. He does not, however, seem completely out of touch; his arguments—though unnecessarily slanted against hip-hop—are rational. “Music seems so synthesized now,” he says. “If you listen to an obscure Journey song like ‘Mother, Father,’ you would be amazed by the degree of musician-ship.... I don’t like rap music. It seems like there’s a lot of anger and negativity directed toward women in rap music, and that’s something I don’t understand. And I do like some new bands. I like Gwen Stefani. And as you probably know, the drummer in No Doubt is a huge Journey fan.”

Actually, I did not know this.

When the *Triumph* docks in Jamaica on Thursday morning, I decide to take a respite from the classic-rock avalanche and embark on the Bob Marley Bus Adventure, an organized tour that takes *Triumph* passengers to the community of Nine Mile, the location of Marley’s birth and grave (the “reggae Graceland,” as it were). The bus leaves at 8:30 A.M., and its riders are offered a complimentary glass of rum punch at 8:29. Upon sipping our breakfast rum, many of the people on the bus sarcastically joke, “Heh heh, if this is the Bob Marley tour, they’re probably going to give us pot.” Well, it turns out that this is exactly what happens, pretty much for the entirety of the six-hour tour. You have not truly vacationed until you’ve spent a morning staring at Bob Marley’s childhood bed with twenty super-high soccer moms who haven’t touched marijuana since Jimmy Carter was president.

If you discount the crime and the poverty and the over-abundance of goats, Jamaica is a wonderful place. According to our tour guide, this is what life there is like: “You wake up, you ride a donkey to work, you go home to smoke, and you dance with your wife. Easy livin’!” Such logic is hard to argue with. Consequently, the Zen perfectitude of my Jamaican morning makes the afternoon’s question-and-answer session with Journey seem stilted and contrived. The session’s second-best question is directed at

drummer Dean Castronovo: “You look so much thinner than I remember—what happened?” (Answer: “I lost fifty-two pounds on the Atkins diet!”) The best question is directed toward Schon: “I have a friend named Ken Miller in Concord, and he says he jams with you guys once in a while, and I’m wondering if he’s telling the truth?” (Answer: “Kevin who?”)

The main problem with the Journey Q&A is bassist Ross Valory, a man who once aspired to be a stand-up comedian and is now the most annoying personality alive. No matter how hard he tries, Valory isn’t a fraction as amusing as REO Speed-wagon keyboardist Neal Doughty, a guy who’s legitimately funny (probably because he doesn’t try at all). When asked what’s different about the REO of today compared to the REO of twenty-five years ago, Doughty says, “Well, as opposed to getting drunk before shows, we actually learn the songs.” When asked what will inspire REO over the next twenty-five years, Doughty says, “Viagra.”

Though the least popular of the three outfits on board, REO is generally the sharpest, least embarrassing band involved with the trip. They even cause a fraction of controversy: while performing a new antiwar song called “Hard to Believe,” a few audience members boo and chant, “Four more years! Four more years!” (This is somewhat confusing, inasmuch as George W. Bush has already been elected.) REO’s political take also differs vastly from that of Styx, whose second guitarist (James Young) asks us to cheer for all the men and women serving in Iraq who “give us the freedom to do things like this.” And by “do things like this,” I can only assume he means, “go on rock cruises near Jamaica.”

“Tommy Shaw is my idol,” says Lori Smola, a thirty-eight-year-old EMT from Daytona Beach. Smola is showing me the Styx tattoo on her shoulder. Smola says she has seen Styx in concert more than two hundred times since 1984, and I believe her. “When I was ten years old, my older brother gave me a poster promoting *The Grand Illusion*, and I liked the shorter guy. That shorter guy was Tommy Shaw. When Tommy joined the Damn Yankees, I was right there with him.” Smola’s e-mail address begins with “tommy1yank.” She’s intense.

I ask Smola how she feels about Styx today, and she says, “Well, they’re classic rock now, unfortunately.” Smola wishes Styx were still just rock. On the *Triumph*, this sentiment is not uncommon; remember, this is a boat where punk never happened, hip-hop doesn’t exist, and Nirvana never

became famous. After the Styx Q&A, I playfully ask a disgruntled Houston construction worker named Glenn Wells why he didn't pose a query to the band, and his response is terse. "I can't think of any question for any of these bands, except one: 'What the hell happened to the music? You guys wrote all those great songs in the '70s, and now you keep trying to make all this modern crap. What happened?'"

In a way, that question is the universally unspoken fear of the Classic Rock Generation: "Why don't new songs by old bands sound like old songs by new bands?" Journey did not arrive on the *Triumph* until Thursday, ostensibly because they were locked in the studio, toiling away on some (allegedly) awesome album that's set for release in 2005. Now, it is possible that the next Journey studio effort will, in fact, be awesome; of course, it is far more likely that it will be released without fanfare, it will sell less than 100,000 copies, and—when the songs are performed live—mature concert audiences will politely sit through the new material while waiting to hear "Don't Stop Believin'" for the four-thousandth time. This is the nature of classic rock in the present tense; if you want to hear the songs you like, you have to pretend the band's contemporary material still matters. It's akin to sitting through a boring conversation with a self-absorbed high-school teacher because you know you're probably going to have sex when they finally shut up.

But there is something else about these bands that makes them relevant to the people who love them; there is a quality within the musicians that prompts people to spend \$3,000 to see them on a cruise ship. The quality is normalcy. There was probably a time when the fans on this boat liked these bands because they were cool; now, part of what the fans appreciate is the fact that these bands *aren't* cool. In 2005, the members of Journey are just dudes who used to be on MTV; they are musicians because music is their job. It is how they pay their mortgage. And people fucking love that.

Case in point: Dominick and Georgia Graziano of Long Island, New York. The Grazianos own a bar called Chili Pepper's Pub, but they plan to rename it the Whiskey Witch. Dominick also works construction. As I talk to a sunbathing Georgia about music (she says she likes "everything," which she classifies as "the Eagles to Velvet Revolver to Switch-foot"), she begs her husband to tell his Journey story. "You gotta tell this guy your Journey story," she keeps insisting. "Tell him the Journey story." Eventually, Dominick does so.

This is the Journey story:

“I’d seen Journey in 1980 or ’81, opening for the Rolling Stones at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia,” Mr. Graziano begins. “Journey comes out onstage, and Steve Perry takes the mic and says to the audience: ‘You know what you guys did? You just made Journey the number-one band in America.’ But the crowd was like, ‘Fuck you, we want the Stones.’ They threw bottles at him. So then we’re in the Grand Wailea Hotel in Maui on our honeymoon—this is four years ago—and we run into Neal Schon and his wife at the hotel bar. We introduce ourselves, and I tell him I remember seeing him in Philadelphia twenty years ago, and he goes, ‘Oh man, I remember that show, Perry opened up his fucking mouth.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, man, they were throwing bottles at you guys,’ and he was like, ‘Yeah, they fucking were.’”

That’s the whole story.

At first, I am substantially underwhelmed by this anecdote, mostly because it has a beginning and a middle but no discernible conclusion. However, I am wrong about this, because a few minutes later, just before I’m about to leave these people alone, the Grazianos casually mention that they’ve kept in touch with the Schon family ever since. Every time Journey plays in the New York area, Schon’s wife makes sure the Grazianos have front-row seats and backstage passes. Georgia even made a yellow baby blanket for Schon’s daughter, Amber. In other words, the leader of this mammoth rock band—the “number-one band in America”—is now (kind of) a family friend. The Grazianos will probably have a nice chat with the Schons on this crazy boat. They will ask how Amber is doing, and Georgia will always know that she helped their baby fall asleep.

Don’t stop believing. I mean it. Don’t.

1. If Shipman had a blog, many people in the comment section would accuse him of being “rockist.”

[2](#). It's really too bad that one of the bands on this cruise wasn't the Canadian power trio Triumph.

“Deep Sabbath”

SPIN’s decision to hire me in 2002 was a direct result of the publication of *Fargo Rock City*, which (at the time) made me nervous; I had this fear that the only thing anyone would ever want me to write about was heavy metal. This was exacerbated by the fact that—a few weeks after my arrival—*SPIN* decided to theme an entire issue around metal, and I ended up writing 75 percent of it. If I took a job at *The Economist* and started covering trade policy, this perception would never change. “Did you happen to see that story about granting China most favored trade status?” people would say. “I think that Metal Dude wrote it.”

These are two stories from that *SPIN* metal issue (September 2002). The first is a misguided attempt to prove how all forms of heavy metal actually derive from Led Zeppelin’s fourth album, a theory I never completely believed. The second piece, however, was legitimately entertaining (at least to me). I did this brief (maybe twenty minute) Q&A with Robert Plant over the telephone, and he was tremendous. If given the choice between talking with a hip, relevant artist or talking with an older, salty rock monster from a bygone era, I’ll take the latter every single time. Young musicians are always obsessed with creating a persona and saying the things they think they’re supposed to say; older guys truly don’t care. When I think back at the rock stars I’ve interviewed, the most unpredictable conversations were almost always with people over forty: Plant, Donald Fagen of Steely Dan (who acted like a college professor trying to get fired), Barry Manilow (who criticized Nine Inch Nails for lacking soul), Bono (who seemed to actively want me to analyze his livelihood), and Ozzy Osbourne (who talked about nazis and riding elephants). The only contemporary artist I’d put in this class is Marilyn Manson; I’ve interviewed him four times, and he was articulate and engaging every time. Manson isn’t necessarily smart, but he’s a goddamn genius.

What’s so great about this Plant conversation is that the only thing we really talked about was how much he hates heavy metal, which was the antithesis of why we wanted him in the magazine. He also completely

disproves my “Zoso hypothesis,” but that hardly seems surprising. I just wish he would have explained what the fuck a hedgerow is.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ZOSO

Led Zeppelin’s fourth studio album—1971’s unnamed *Zoso* (so called for the enigmatic symbols on its cover)—is the most famous hard-rock album ever recorded, not to mention a watershed moment for every grizzled old man who’s ever carried a bundle of sticks on his back. *Zoso* is not Zeppelin’s best album (that would be *Houses of the Holy*) or their heaviest (*Physical Graffiti*) or even their “most metal” (*Led Zeppelin II*). However, it’s the defining endeavor for the band, and for the genre it accidentally created. Epic, ethereal, and eerily sexual, *Zoso* is the origin of everything that sounds, feels, or even tastes vaguely metallic, except maybe Metallica and that sludge from Scandinavia (both of which come from Black Sabbath’s *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*).

Need proof? Here, track by track, is everything ever blasted across your high-school parking lot, as told through the sonic vision of *Zoso*, via guitarist Jimmy Page and his dragon pants ...

“Black Dog” = rap metal = Korn’s “A.D.I.D.A.S.” Identifying the dawn of the rap-rock idiom is not easy. Some suggest Rage Against the Machine’s self-titled debut (1992); others point to the Public Enemy–Anthrax collaboration “Bring tha Noize” (1991), Faith No More’s *The Real Thing* (1989), or Run-D.M.C.’s “Rock Box” (1983). Paul Stanley apologists will claim it’s “All Hell’s Breaking Loose” (from KISS’s 1983 album *Lick It Up*). However, it was truly spawned during the first fifteen seconds of *Zoso*—Robert Plant informs a young lass that he intends to make her sweat and groove (not necessarily in that order), and his wise words require no riffing. Kid Rock—ten months old at the time—definitely saw a marketing opportunity.

“Rock and Roll” = hair metal = Cinderella’s “Gypsy Road.” Initially conceived by Page as a boogie-bang tribute to the “roots” of rock, it’s the only track on *Zoso* that sounds like prototypical blues-based pop metal,

which is to say that it sounds like Aerosmith (or all the '80s gutter-glam bands who later aspired to be Aerosmith). Perhaps you recall “Rock and Roll” being eloquently covered by Vince Neil and Sebastian Bach at the 1989 Moscow Music Peace Festival (or perhaps not).

“The Battle of Evermore” = prog metal = Yngwie Malmsteen’s “Riot in the Dungeons.” Now, granted—“The Battle of Evermore” doesn’t sound like Fates Warning or Celtic Frost or Steel Prophet. But it operates like progressive metal: it fades in like falling snow, describes Dark Lords and ring-wraiths, and it certainly never explains what this battle is supposed to be about (though some speculate it’s a retelling of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields from *The Return of the King*, so maybe it’s about Peter Jackson). The details don’t matter as much as the deeper motive, which built the “prog” template. In rock, “progressive” doesn’t mean writing about the future; it means writing about a past that never happened.

“Stairway to Heaven” = metal power ballad = Warrant’s “Heaven.” Depending on your perspective, “Stairway to Heaven” is either (a) the most popular song of the rock era, or (b) the most overplayed song in FM history, thereby making it either (c) the greatest track of the past fifty years, or (d) the only song worse than “Hotel California.” Yet the significance of this never-released single will haunt proms for all eternity. It allowed—nay, demanded—that every metal band make at least one song that your mom might like.

“Misty Mountain Hop” = L.A. “reality” metal = Guns n’ Roses’ “Welcome to the Jungle.” When intertwined, the lyrics from these two songs become a conversation between Robert Plant and Axl Rose, discussing what it’s really like to move to California and meet the weird kids: A naïve teenager goes to the West Coast for the first time, sees crowds of people sitting on the grass with flowers in their hair, and hears them say, “Hey, boy, do you wanna score?” These are the people who can find whatever you may need, and if you got the money, honey, they got your disease. But our protagonist soon learns that if you go down in the streets today, baby, you better (you better!) open your eyes, whoa yeah, ’cause you’re in the jungle, baby, and you’re gonna die.

“Four Sticks” = stripper metal = Monster Magnet’s “Power-trip.” As long as naked women are swinging on poles in public and providing \$10 lap dances to truckers and unemployed stockbrokers, there shall be a demand for this type of fast-and-heavy, darkly sleazy rock ’n’ roll. All praise to Allah.

“Going to California” = unplugged metal = everything on *Five Man Acoustical Jam*. And she’s buyyyyyyyyyyying a staaaairway ... to ... Tesla.

“When the Levee Breaks” = stoner metal = Fu Manchu’s “Boogie Van.” Drums from God, lyrics from the Depression, guitars that go everywhere, guitars that go nowhere, and the sonic weight of a thousand woolly rhinos falling from Skylab. There is no light black enough for listening to John Bonham. *Zoso* did not make people take drugs; *Zoso* made drugs, and Kyuss, and every other trance-inducing metal machine, completely necessary.

NOT A WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

Few would argue with the theory that Led Zeppelin invented heavy metal. One who will, however, is Robert Plant, the golden god who became the archetype for every metal throat who followed. And it’s not just that Plant dismisses the entire genre because it rips him off; he thinks metal bands suck because they don’t rip him off *enough*. It’s been more than twenty years since John Bonham’s death ended Zeppelin’s epic reign, but Plant’s unrepentance has not waned.

The fifty-three-year-old Brit is touring and has released a solo album (*Dreamland*) juxtaposing vintage blues and folk with modern trippiness. He remains willing to criticize just about every hard-rock band that’s ever existed, and he even took a shot at the very idea of *SPIN* celebrating a musical idiom he clearly hates.

“After you finish this issue about the fucking absurdity of boys trying to be more than what they should be—Conan the Warrior goes on tour, or whatever—come see my new show,” he said at the conclusion of our interview. “Just come along, because it’s such a trip. And when you decide

to do an issue about psychedelia, I'll sit in my rocking chair and tell you some stories about Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison."

CK: Even though most people consider Led Zeppelin to be the creators of heavy metal, you've always insisted that Zeppelin wasn't a metal band. So in your mind, what is "heavy metal," and why doesn't it include Led Zeppelin?

Robert Plant: You've made a mistake there; you cannot classify anything, anywhere. Classification is a killer. Otherwise, we're all stuck. It means Mother Love Bone or Linkin Park or Creed will never do anything except what they've already done. Led Zeppelin did lots of different things—working in North Africa, writing songs like "Friends" and "Four Sticks" and "Kashmir." I can't imagine "Kashmir" being considered a heavy-metal piece. I don't think "Stairway to Heaven" was very heavy metal. But we were bombastic. We took no prisoners. We took great delight in playing with bands who had the attitude and ego that was so prevalent in America at the time. Everyone was a self-proclaimed star, which was dumbfounding to me. So to turn up the intensity and be truly bombastic—that's when we just out-heavied everybody.

CK: But why is it, despite Led Zeppelin being so musically diverse, that most of the bands Zeppelin influenced only picked up on one thing that the band did, which was to play loud and heavy? I mean, did you like any of the bands that did that?

Robert Plant: Well, I think some of the Seattle bands gloried in a kind of music John Bonham always called "Deep Sabbath," which was a conglomerate of English, sketchy, blues-based thud. It was inane and had no mystery to it at all. I know from my escapades with guys from Seattle, and from working with Steve Albini, that this Sabbath style of music—that almost clumsy, plodding, slog metal—just never really sprang out of the speakers or moved into any acoustic area. It was just an aping of the Led Zep thing.

CK: Well, then, you must find it ironic that most people who love your band today also tend to love Black Sabbath.

Robert Plant: No, no. I don't agree. I've been playing in festivals in Europe for the past year, and I find those audiences want the sensitivity, too. But maybe it's because I've been playing to a lot of Latin people. I

played the Isle of Wight Festival last week, and one of the songs I did was “Going to California,” because it’s my kind of bag. Now, whether you would call “Going to California” heavy metal, I don’t know; it might be a bit embarrassing at times lyrically, but it did sum up a period of my life when I was twenty-two. And the audience was going absolutely apeshit, and these were punk guys with Mohican haircuts. So I think you’re wrong.

CK: Maybe so. But it seems that whenever people talk about the dawn of heavy metal, the logic usually goes like this: Black Sabbath created a certain kind of sound that was replicated by British acts and later nü metal bands, and Led Zeppelin sort of invented the sound and image for groups like Guns n’ Roses and Aerosmith. Do you disagree with that?

Robert Plant: Well, I think the guitarist in Aerosmith makes no attempt to hide his admiration for Jimmy Page, and that’s inherent in a lot of their tracks. Aerosmith are basically a pop group. They write pop songs, and they’re aiming for the charts and Top 40 television. And when you think of the treachery of hard rock—when you think of bands like Bon Jovi, and when you think of ... um ... what were some of the other hair bands from that era?

CK: Mötley Crüe? Ratt?

Robert Plant: Yeah, yeah. Those bands were hanging on to some real big pop melodies and dressing them up as something aggressive and boyish and testosterone-ridden, but it was still “Livin’ on a Prayer,” you know? And that’s not a great place to be coming from.

CK: It isn’t? Why not?

Robert Plant: Well, it is if it’s a career move and you want to do “Bridge Over Troubled Water” when you’re sixty.

CK: Do you think a lot of those bands were ultimately influenced more by Zep’s debauched depiction in the book *Hammer of the Gods: The Led Zeppelin Saga* than by what’s actually on your records? It seems like they copied your espoused lifestyle more than your actual songs.

Robert Plant: Who knows? I mean, is it all a career move? Getting fucked up is quite easy if you have more than thirty dollars. It was interesting to watch all that, because I never read that book. But I don’t think anyone could have lived through the stuff that [former Zeppelin tour manager] Richard Cole blubbered out to the guy who wrote it [author Stephen Davis].

CK: I really have a hard time believing that you've never read *Hammer of the Gods*. Weren't you curious?

Robert Plant: The guy who wrote that book knew nothing about the band. I think he'd only hung around us once. He got all his information from a guy who had a heroin problem who happened to be associated with us. The only thing I read was the "After Zeppelin" part, because I was so eager to get on with music and stop living in a dream state.

CK: Does it bother you that, in the eyes of a lot of people, the only reason John Paul Jones was not asked to participate in your 1994 reunion with Jimmy Page was financial? And that you and Page simply didn't want to split the revenue three ways?

Robert Plant: [*chuckles*] It's like this: Led Zeppelin was a very strange, four-quadrant marriage. And when the marriage dissolved, when John passed away, I really didn't think I'd work with any of those guys again. When we were kids, Bonham and I were the toughest guys around. Nobody wanted to be around us, because we believed in ourselves so much and we were really unbearable. So when he passed, I really didn't want to stay with the southern guys—the two guys from London. I thought enough was enough, and I'd lost the one guy I'd been close with since I was fifteen. But when MTV asked me to do the *Unplugged* show, I thought, *I can't take all the credit for this. I can't do the Zeppelin stuff and sit there with a broad grin on my face*. So I asked Jimmy if it was possible for us to start writing again, without it becoming some sad Zeppelin reunion. And there was really no room for anybody else. There was no physical room or emotional room or creative room.

CK: But couldn't you have toured with Page, Jones, and Bonham's son Jason on drums?

Robert Plant: But what the fuck for? John Bonham's kid isn't as good as John Bonham. Look, I know you're a journalist, so I'll go along with this question. I don't make my living by making my living. My time is so important that I can't compromise my taste—or my idea of what's right—simply to match someone else's view of what's a good, calculated move. And can you imagine what a lumbering monster that tour would've been? It would have been quite sluttish to come back firing like a bunch of hard rockers. The important thing was that Page and I decided to write again.

CK: How often do you talk to Jimmy Page for nonbusiness purposes?

Robert Plant: We're going to a tennis match on Tuesday.

CK: Really? Who's playing?

Robert Plant: Fuck if I know! I just made that up [*laughs*].

CK: I realize this probably seems ridiculous to you, but there is a whole class of people who listen to classic-rock radio and wonder if you guys are actually friends.

Robert Plant: There's definitely a warmth between us, and a patience. We're like Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon. The reality is that Page is a very clever, talented guy who has a particular slant on music, and I was always his sidekick who had a different slant on music.

CK: Earlier in this interview, you said a Led Zeppelin reunion tour would have been a "lumbering monster." But what about bands who are even older than you? Do you think the Rolling Stones are still able to maintain a sense of conviction at this point in their career?

Robert Plant: No. But I think they've gone somewhere else, and I really can't be critical. Because if they have a good time and they play well, it's a communion. And it's somewhere for people to go who remember when that stuff was shit-hot. This kind of thing happens every year. And guess what? You [as a journalist] get a salary, and I get a lot of dough if I sell a lot of records. It's called entertainment.

CK: As the man who heard them all, what is the coolest, heaviest, most "metal" Jimmy Page guitar riff?

Robert Plant: Hmm. [*pauses*] That's a very good question. I guess it's gotta be "Whole Lotta Love," doesn't it? And there's another song that isn't heavy but that I love because the guitar is fucking amazing—"For Your Life" off *Presence*. And then there's the beginning of "The Wanton Song" and "Immigrant Song." I suppose "Immigrant Song" might have it over "Whole Lotta Love," but the thing about "Whole Lotta Love" is that it's quite a sexy track.

CK: Actually, that reminds me of something: on "Whole Lotta Love" you say you're going to give some girl "every inch" of your love. But you're British. Why don't you use the metric system?

Robert Plant: That would change the whole tone of the thing! I suppose today it would have to be, "I'll give you several centimeters of bliss." But people of my generation know nothing about the metric system. I'm fortunate to say I still use inches—or at least that's what my girlfriend says, and she's twenty-nine.

Disposable Heroes

For most of my youth, Metallica fans made me nervous. By the time *Master of Puppets* was released in 1986, the kids who were already into Metallica seemed kind of nuts. These were usually weight lifters who had previously liked Mötley Crüe and Van Halen before suddenly deciding that anything overtly commercial was absolutely fake, and that singing about girls and partying was pathetic, and that real rock bands were supposed to wear blue jeans and hate their parents. Being a fan of Metallica in the '80s was not supposed to be fun. Loving Metallica was like being Catholic: if you truly believed, it was supposed to inform every aspect of your life. I could not relate to this. I preferred songs about having sex with underage girls in elevators, but Metallica always seemed to be singing about being burned alive (or something along those lines).

By 1992, everything about loving Metallica had evolved, even though the music was only slightly different (the songs were shorter and less complex, but it was still the same premise). I remember the first time I went to a party and watched two sorority girls sing along with “Enter Sandman”—it blew my mind. It was like watching Nancy Reagan smoke pot. In the early '80s, Metallica had refused to make videos; now they seemed to make a new video every six weeks. Over time, it was this “mainstreaming of Metallica” that started to fascinate me, and I went back and seriously reexamined a lot of their older material. I like their music more now than I did back when I was in high school, particularly *Kill 'Em All* and *Garage Days Re-Revisited*.

When *The New York Times Magazine* asked me to do a profile on Metallica before the release of the documentary *Some Kind of Monster*, it felt like the film was going to be a really big deal: every possible media outlet appeared to be covering it. However, *Some Kind of Monster* underperformed at the box office (at least compared to its prerelease expectations). In a weird way, all the media coverage may have actually hurt the film's commercial viability; you could almost experience the entire movie by reading about it. I still think *Some Kind of Monster* is a wonderful documentary, but everything you need to know about it can be illustrated within the span of three thousand words. Sometimes I suspect audiences

assumed they already knew exactly what this movie was about, so they saw no reason to pay \$10 to see it. A year after its release, I happened to interview Lars Ulrich again, and I casually asked if he was surprised *Some Kind of Monster* didn't make \$20 million at the box office. He was not.

"I'm fucking amazed it even made two million dollars in America," he said. "I can't fucking believe it even got released. Do you think people in Nebraska give a fuck if A. O. Scott says some documentary is good? Do you think anyone cares what Owen Gleiberman thinks about Metallica? I never got caught up in that hype. We didn't make fucking *E.T.*"

There is a line in this story where I refer to *Some Kind of Monster* director Joe Berlinger as an "egomaniac," a classification Berlinger adamantly denies. I have casually run into Berlinger on three occasions since the publication of this article, and he always brings up the issue of his alleged egomania immediately, regardless of where we are or what we happen to be talking about.

Band on the Couch

(June 2004)

There is a scene midway through the documentary *Some Kind of Monster* that defines the film's vision; it's arguably the movie's most emotional moment and certainly its most archetypical. We see the rock group Metallica—the most commercially successful heavy-metal band in rock history—sitting around a table with their therapist, trying to establish how they will finish recording their next album. The recording process has already been complicated by the departure of their bassist and the drinking problem of singer James Hetfield; Hetfield has just returned to the band after a lengthy stint in rehab. Fifteen years ago, Metallica drank so much they were referred to by their fans as “Alcoholica,” and the band members all thought that was hilarious. But now, things are different; now, Hetfield can only work four hours a day, because the other twenty hours are devoted to mending a marriage that was shattered by alcohol (and the rock 'n' roll lifestyle that came with it).

Metallica's drummer, a kinetic forty-one-year-old Dane named Lars Ulrich, is having a difficult time dealing with these new parameters. He paces the room, finally telling Hetfield that the singer is “self-absorbed” and “latently controlling.” Everyone slowly grows uncomfortable. “I realize now that I barely knew you before,” Ulrich says, despite the fact that he's known Hetfield since 1981. The language he uses sounds like outtakes from an *Oprah* episode on self-help books—except Ulrich punctuates every sentence with a very specific (and completely unprintable) expletive.¹ The scene closes with Ulrich's mouth six inches from Hetfield's ever-stoic skull, screaming that singular expletive into the singer's face. It's the most intimate, most honest, most emotionally authentic exchange these two men have ever experienced.

This is also the scene where—if you are in the audience—you will probably laugh.

I've seen this film twice in screening rooms, and it happened both times. Virtually everyone in the theater snickered like condescending hyenas, just

as they did during every other visceral, meaningful moment in this documentary. And so did I.

Now, perhaps that's cruel, and perhaps that's predictable. But it's mostly because *Some Kind of Monster* presents an uncomfortable kind of realism: it's the most in-depth, long-form psychological profile of any rock band that's ever existed; it's also the closest anyone has ever come to making a real-life *This Is Spinal Tap*. One could even argue that *Some Kind of Monster* is a rock 'n' roll film that has nothing to do with music, and that it's actually a two-hour, twenty-minute meditation on therapy, celebrity, and the possibility that just about everyone is a little damaged. That's because the men who made *Some Kind of Monster* (directors Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky) and its on-screen psychologist (a sweater-clad sixty-five-year-old named Phil Towle) seemed to need therapy as much as Metallica.

"If you strip down all human beings to their core, you'll find the same stuff," claims Towle, the "performance enhancement coach" who served as Metallica's therapist over the two years in which *Some Kind of Monster* was filmed. "You will find fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, fear of being controlled, fear of being unloved, and the desire to love and be loved. That becomes more complicated with hard-rock bands, because—when you exist in a mode of instant gratification—you're never hungry for depth of intimacy. Sex, drugs, and booze are glorified in rock 'n' roll, but those are really just symptoms of the desire for relief."

This is all probably true. In fact, part of what makes *Some Kind of Monster* so compelling is that Towle—the hyper-nurturing Midwesterner now recognized for saving Metallica—seems to possess as many insecurities as the band he was paid \$40,000 a month to help. There is not one person involved in *Some Kind of Monster* who could safely be described as "okay."

And it's entirely possible that this is the point.

In order to understand how *Some Kind of Monster* came into existence, you need to know two stories. The first is the history of Metallica, a two-decade narrative that explains (a) why this movie makes people laugh, and (b) why this movie is so unprecedented. Twenty years ago, there was no band on earth who seemed less likely to release a documentary about dealing with interpersonal issues; in a way, it still doesn't seem possible.

Formed in 1981, Metallica became the first important speed-metal band; they played faster and harder than just about every group who had ever come before them. While other '80s metal bands wore spandex and sang about girls, Metallica wore jeans and sang about Armageddon; their first album was called *Kill 'Em All*, a title that was actually less aggressive than the phrase they wanted to use. Hetfield was the frontman, a scowling gun enthusiast who was raised as a Christian Scientist and now hated the world. Drummer Ulrich was a former tennis prodigy in Denmark who moved to California with his affluent family as a teenager, bonding with the antisocial Hetfield over unpopular British metal bands like Diamond Head and Angel Witch. Metallica's lead guitarist is Kirk Hammett, a dark, androgynous personality spawned from a broken home; he spent his sixteenth birthday trying to stop his father from pummeling his mother. Hammett is the personality buffer between Hetfield and Ulrich (if Metallica truly was Spinal Tap, he would be the Harry Shearer character). The group's original bassist was a swivel-necked San Franciscan named Cliff Burton, but he died in 1986; while touring through Europe, Metallica had a cataclysmic (and bizarre) highway accident outside of Copenhagen. Their tour bus actually fell on Burton. He was immediately replaced by Jason Newsted, a longtime Metallica superfan who had always dreamed of performing alongside his heroes; after being asked to join the band, the other three members mercilessly hazed Newsted for well over a year (for example, they would constantly—and erroneously—tell strangers that he was gay). These are hard people.

Originally a cult band for burnouts and speed freaks, Metallica went on to become the Led Zeppelin of their generation. They've sold over 90 million albums worldwide; while other metal acts were buried by the early-'90s grunge movement, Metallica only became stronger. And the driving force behind their invincibility seemed to be the fact that they did not care about anything. They fueled their tours on Jägermeister (Hetfield used to drink a bottle every night). They "betrayed" their fan base in 1996 by cutting off their hair, the speed-metal equivalent of Dylan going electric. When kids started illegally downloading their songs off Napster, Metallica had the audacity to sue their own fan base. Metallica actually did what other rock bands only aspire to do: by ignoring trends, they became immune to cultural change. They were, it seemed, unbreakable.

Until (of course) they started to break. A 2001 *Playboy* interview illustrated (and—according to the band—perpetuated) a growing sense of discontent within Metallica, eventually resulting in Newsted's decision to quit after fourteen years of service. Sensing the possibility of losing an extremely lucrative artistic entity, Metallica's management team (an organization called Q-Prime) put Metallica in touch with Towle, a man who'd previously worked with the St. Louis Rams during their 2000 Super Bowl run and had unsuccessfully tried to save another of Q-Prime's clients (the political rap-metal group Rage Against the Machine). Formerly a gang counselor in Chicago, Towle now specializes in psychotherapeutic scenarios involving big money and massive egos. The hope was that he would stop Metallica from imploding; coincidentally, those therapy sessions initiated just before Berlinger and Sinofsky started filming the band's attempt to record their next album.

They ended up filming for 715 days.

It seems Berlinger and Sinofsky had sustained a relationship with Metallica ever since the 1996 HBO documentary *Paradise Lost*, the chronicle of three teenage Metallica fans accused of ritualistically murdering children in West Memphis, Arkansas. Metallica had allowed the two directors to use the band's music in *Paradise Lost* for free, and the two parties had kept in touch, casually discussing the possibility of one day working together on a larger project.

However, in the period following *Paradise Lost*, Berlinger and Sinofsky's professional relationship began to fray. This is the second story.

Berlinger (who looks like he could be George Lucas's kid brother) is a workaholic with a paradoxical personality: he's an egomaniac, but he's also obsessed with getting other people's approval. Though he had collaborated with Sinofsky for years (most notably on the critically adored documentary *Brother's Keeper*), he began to question the value of their partnership. Essentially, he wanted to go solo. In 2000, Berlinger broke away from Sinofsky to direct *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*, the big-budget sequel to *The Blair Witch Project*.

That decision more or less destroyed Berlinger's life. "I presided over one of the biggest flops in cinema history," says Berlinger. That's something of an exaggeration, but it's not far off—critics hated *Blair Witch 2*, and it made very little money. Berlinger blames this on Artisan Entertainment for completely reediting *Blair Witch 2*, and his complaint

doesn't sound wholly irrational; some of the enforced changes were drastic. For example, Berlinger had originally wanted to use the Frank Sinatra tune "Witchcraft" as the score for the opening credits; Artisan changed it to "Disposable Teens" by Marilyn Manson.

Berlinger was devastated by the response to *Blair Witch 2*. He became a recluse and melodramatically considered quitting film altogether. Meanwhile, Sinofsky feared his collaborative relationship with Berlinger was finished. "We had serious problems that we never addressed," says Sinofsky. "We remained friends, but—when he went off to do *Blair Witch*—I was envious. And I was fearful that he wouldn't come back." However, he did come back. A depressed Berlinger longingly watched *Paradise Lost* in his living room one night, and—upon hearing the ominous strains of the Metallica song "Sanitarium"—he suddenly remembered the forgotten idea of making a rock movie. He contacted Sinofsky, and they contacted Metallica. Now, the original plan for this project was strange: they were going to film the band in the studio and make a series of infomercials (yes, *infomercials*). These infomercials would be broadcast in thirty-minute increments on late-night television, and the idea was that people would see these infomercials and order Metallica's next album. It was going to be this innovative, crazy way to sell records.

But then things got crazier.

When production on this unnamed "Metallica infomercial project" began in 2001, the group was already mired in turmoil: Newsted had officially quit the band after only one session with Towle. Newsted still considers the idea of rock band therapy to be a little ridiculous. "Something that's really important to note—and this isn't pointed at anyone—is something I knew long before I met James Hetfield or anyone else," Newsted said in an interview from his ranch in western Montana. "Certain people are made to be opened up and exposed. Certain people are not meant to be opened up and exposed. I'll leave it at that."

For the first thirty minutes of *Some Kind of Monster* (roughly three months in real time), you see a band that doesn't necessarily like each other, struggling with a record no one seems enthused about creating; it's sort of the metal version of the Beatles' *Let It Be*. But then—suddenly and without much explanation—Hetfield disappears into rehab. Ulrich and Hammett have nothing to do in the interim, except talk to their therapist. This is the

point where *Some Kind of Monster* starts to change; what it becomes is not a glorification of rock 'n' roll, but an illustration of how rock 'n' roll manufactures a reality that's almost guaranteed to make people incomplete. Metallica's massive success—and the means through which they achieved it—meant they never had to intellectually mature past the age of nineteen.

"I think most people in rock bands have arrested development," Hammett says now. "Society doesn't demand people in rock bands to do certain things. You're able to start drinking whenever you want, and you can play shows drunk, and you can get offstage and continue to be drunk, and people love it. They toast their glasses to an artist who's drunk and breaking things and screaming and wrestling in the middle of a restaurant. Things like that happened to us, and people cheered. I remember reading [the Led Zeppelin biography] *Hammer of the Gods*, and I thought, *I wanna be like that all the time*. What I didn't realize is that the stories in that book took place over an entire career.² We were trying to act like that every single night."

To some, that might sound like a cliché sentiment for a millionaire musician to express; it almost blames society for making guitar heroes wasted and lawless. But this kind of self-discovery is part of what makes *Some Kind of Monster* a strikingly modern film: by fusing the accelerated culture of therapy with the accelerated culture of celebrity, it illustrates why the people inside those two realms can't keep up.

"Metallica's evolution as people was aborted by their surreal existence," says Towle. "Kirk Hammett once told me that coming off tour was like experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome; he said it was like leaving a war and reentering real life. When I asked him why he felt that way, he said, 'Because now I have to empty the trash.' The profundity in that statement is in its simplicity: rock stars are infantilized by people who do everything for them. We insulate them from a reality that would actually be good for them."

This unreality does not only apply to drinking and garbage removal, either. That becomes especially clear when Hetfield returns to the band from rehab as a completely changed man (he even begins wearing eyeglasses, for some reason). Slowly, the deeper issue of *Some Kind of Monster* emerges: Hetfield and Ulrich have spent their entire adulthood intertwined, but they've never been close. For the past twenty years, they've never needed to have a real relationship with each other, even though Hetfield was the best man in Ulrich's wedding. And that is what you

mostly see over the last hour of this film: two middle-aged men fighting through their neuroses and confusion, earnestly talking about *intimacy* and *emotional betrayal* and *how they feel about each other*.

It is important to remember that these are the same two men who cowrote a song called “Seek and Destroy.”

Why Metallica allowed Berlinger and Sinofsky to film this process remains baffling. “Lars felt the therapy sessions were actually enabled by the presence of the cameras,” says Berlinger. “He felt the cameras forced them to be honest.” There’s certainly no question about how much the band believes in this film: when Elektra Records grew concerned over the project’s escalating cost, the label considered turning it into a reality TV show (this was back in 2002, when MTV’s *The Osbournes* was the hottest commodity on television). By that point, both the filmmakers and the group saw this solely as a theatrical release. They wanted complete control, so they bought the rights. Which means Metallica wrote Elektra a check ... for \$4.3 million.

That, obviously, is a lot of money. But Metallica has more money than God. That’s another strangely personal insight in *Some Kind of Monster*—you get to see just how mind-blowingly rich these guys actually are. And particularly for Metallica, wealth is not something they necessarily want to brag about; remember, this is a band who *sued its own fans* just two years ago. The core Metallica disciples tend to be alienated, working-class males; one wonders how these people will react to an extended sequence in *Some Kind of Monster* where Ulrich—the most self-consciously urbane member of the group—sips champagne and sells his collection of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s artwork at a Christie’s auction for \$12 million. Hetfield and Hammett would have both preferred to see the auction scene removed from the film (Hetfield described the footage as “downright embarrassing”), but Ulrich wanted it in the movie. He feels it is an essential aspect of his personality. And as he explains his position, you can hear two years of therapy dripping off his voice. He has no problem talking about *anything*, even if it’s “downright embarrassing.” I suddenly find myself wishing that every rock star I interviewed had spent twenty-four months in psychotherapy.

“Art is my passion,” says Ulrich. “It just so happens that art operates in those kind of high financial neighborhoods. If people find that distasteful or obnoxious, I can’t control that. It’s part of who I am. If you’re going to

paint a portrait of the people in Metallica, that has to play a role, because that is who I am. And if people want to focus on the financial elements of art instead of the creative elements of art, I can't control that, either."

"I hate to think about this film as just being pro-therapy or anti-therapy," Berlinger says when asked about the philosophical message of *Some Kind of Monster*. "To me, it's more about how it's okay to admit you have issues."

Well, maybe so. But it's impossible to watch this documentary without drawing certain conclusions about the process it explores. On one hand, everyone I interviewed for this story concedes that Metallica would have likely broken up without Towle's assistance. But is this "enlightened" Metallica much better off? If a band's entire aesthetic is based on the musical expression of inexplicable rage, what's left when that rage is vanquished? One could suggest that Towle has exorcised the singular demon that made Metallica relevant. Moreover, the depiction of Towle's behavior during the final third of the film validates every criticism ever directed toward therapists: over time, Towle slowly seems to believe that he is a *member* of Metallica; he even tries to contribute lyrics for the album. And when a (completely reasonable) Hetfield tries to end the group's therapy, Towle attempts to convince him that this is a mistake, and that Hetfield is simply struggling with his inability to "trust," and that the band still needs his \$40,000-a-month assistance. Even the filmmakers found this strange.

"When he started using the word *we* instead of the word *I*, Joe and I kept asking ourselves, 'Is this something a therapist would say [to a client]?' I always thought it was a little weird," Sinofsky says.

Not surprisingly, Towle denies any confusion over his role with the band.

"A documentary is subjective, and it's affected by what footage is selected by the documentarians," he says. "The way that it's portrayed implies that I was pushed out the door, and that's not what happened. I don't want to sound defensive about this, but the film makes it seem like I just wanted to extend my gravy train, and anyone who knows me would know that nothing could be further from the truth."

Regardless of how one views Towle's motivations, it's hard to attack his results: the guys in Metallica are, without question, much happier humans. I interviewed James Hetfield in 1996, and it was one of the worst

conversations of my professional life—he was surly, impenetrable, and unable (or maybe just unwilling) to think in the abstract. When I interviewed him for this story, he was a completely evolved person: affable, nonconfrontational, and willing (almost wanting) to chat about his feelings. In fact, when I asked him about Towle’s attempt to keep Metallica in therapy they no longer needed, Hetfield gave the most reasonable answer imaginable.

“Phil has issues, too,” Hetfield said. “Every therapist has issues. We’re all just people. We’ve all got some brokenness inside us. Phil’s abandonment issues came up, and he tried to mask them by saying, ‘You’re mistrusting me.’ And it’s like, wow—that’s a really important point in the movie.”

And a really funny point, kind of. But sometimes the difference between self-actualization and self-amusement is less than you think.

1. The expletive being “fuck.”

[2](#). And—quite possibly—never happened at all (see page 96).

Unbuttoning the Hardest Button to Button

The following White Stripes story probably bothered me more than any piece I've ever written. This seems curious in retrospect, because it now reads like a workmanlike profile containing no controversy whatsoever.

This was the first official cover story I wrote for *SPIN*, and (I think) the first significant cover story on the White Stripes for any national publication in America. Putting the Stripes on the cover seemed a little crazy at the time, because their fourth album (*Elephant*) had not yet been released and it was still unclear whether this band was famous enough to be on the cover of a major magazine. This is always a tricky issue at a place like *SPIN*; at the time, the publication's circulation was something like 525,000 and there was always this unwritten theory that suggested it was unwise to put any artist on the cover who couldn't sell at least 525,000 copies of their own record (in other words, it didn't make sense to try to promote a rock magazine with a rock band who was less popular than the magazine itself). When I started the reporting for this article, their previous album (*White Blood Cells*) still hadn't gone gold. As a consequence, I think I unconsciously felt a pressure to "sell" the band to readers, which is why I included a sentence where I refer to the music of the Stripes as "so fucking good." I regret doing this. I mean, the White stripes *are* fucking good, but that sentence sounds completely idiotic.

The whole process was difficult. Jack White's main motivation for doing the interview appeared to be his desire to explain why he hated interviews (this happens a lot with modern artists; Julian Casablancas is the same way). As a result, the piece is too self-conscious. However, the larger problem came when I turned the story in to *SPIN* and one of my editors had a problem with Jack's quotes. The editor questioned the relevance of White's race-related quotes; I felt they were the only legitimately new elements of the story. We locked horns on this point, and—as I am wont to do—I totally over-reacted. I threatened to take my byline off the story, which would have been stupid. I briefly considered quitting *SPIN*, which would have been even stupider.

Late in the editing process, I talked to the *SPIN* copy chief about the situation, and he (mildly) agreed with my argument. By chance, this particular copy editor was quitting the magazine in two weeks and moving to Virginia, so he just added the quotes back into the story and pushed it through to the production staff (without really telling anyone else). However, this copy editor also gave me some wise advice before capitulating to my request: “You know,” he said, “a magazine only exists in the world for one month, and people don’t remember anything. They usually can’t remember what they read two days ago. Six months from now, you will feel ridiculous for having been so overwrought about a few quotes from Jack White.”

And I suppose I kind of did. But I also kind of didn’t.

GARAGE DAYS UNVISITED

(OCTOBER 2002)

Jack White flicks his cigarette ash into a glass of water. He and Meg White are sitting on a couch in an unnecessarily swanky hotel room in downtown Chicago, trying to explain how it feels to be a punkish underground band—with modest sales and an antimedia posture—that has somehow become America’s most frothed-over creative venture.

“We’re in a weird spot right now,” Jack says. “To be honest, I have a hard time finding a reason to be on the cover of *SPIN*. It was like being on the MTV Movie Awards [where they performed their recent single “Fell in Love with a Girl”]. You start asking yourself, ‘What are we getting from this? What are we destroying by doing this? Does it mean anything?’ So you try it. You wonder if you’ll end up being any different than everyone else, and usually, the answer is no.”

Actually, the answer is maybe. If you ignored the White Stripes’ songs, you’d assume they were a novelty act: they wear only matching red, white, and black clothing, they have no bassist, and they’ve built their public persona around a fabricated relationship (they claim to be siblings, but they’re actually an ex-couple whose divorce was finalized in 2000). However, this joke has no punch line. The White Stripes represent a sound

(postmodern garage rock) from a specific place (downtown Detroit), and it's packaged within a conscious mix of sonic realness and media boondoggle. They have done what all great rock bands are eventually supposed to do—they've reinvented blues music.

As we talk, guitarist Jack speaks in full, articulate paragraphs. Drummer Meg mostly hugs a pillow and curls her legs underneath her body, hiding feet covered by rainbow-colored socks that resemble Fruit Stripe gum's zebra mascot. The night before, the duo played the Metro club near Wrigley Field, and it was an acceptable ninety-minute show. Tonight they'll play a blistering set at the Metro that won't start until 12:55 A.M., and it will annihilate the molecules of Illinois's air: They will do an extended version of a new song ("Ball and Biscuit") that makes references to being a seventh son and includes a grinding guitar solo, shredded over the beat from Queen's "We Will Rock You." They'll cover the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun." Everything will be raw and unrehearsed and imperfect.

And that's why it's so fucking good.

"We have to go back," Jack insists. "The last twenty years have been filled with digital, technological crap that's taken the soul out of music. The technological metronome of the United States is obsessed with progress, so now you have all these gearheads who want to lay down three thousand tracks in their living room. That wasn't the point."

"The point," says Meg, "is being a live band."

Perhaps Meg is right. However, classifying the White Stripes as two kids in a stellar live band scarcely describes their curious career arc and often contradictory aesthetic. Supposedly formed on Bastille Day in 1997, they got mild attention for being bassless and dressing like pieces of candy. After they'd released two albums (1999's eponymous debut and 2000's *De Stijl*, named after a Dutch art movement that emphasized primal abstraction) and toured with Pavement and Sleater-Kinney, there was a growing suspicion that Jack and Meg were succeeding where Jon Spencer and his moronic Blues Explosion had failed—there is little irony in what the Stripes create. "We wanted things to be as childish as possible, but with no sense of humor," Jack explains, "because that's how children think." Of course, children also lie; children will conflate truth and fiction for no reason at all.

Like Pavement in '92, the Stripes brought romance and mystery to an underground devoid of rock 'n' roll fantasy. By the release of *White Blood Cells* in the summer of 2001, they'd evolved into a cultural phenomenon.

Eventually, they signed a lucrative deal with V2 (which has since rereleased their earlier albums), had their own Lego-centric MTV hit, and were embraced by modern-rock radio programmers suffering from a post-Bizkit hangover.

V2 president Andy Gershon, who reportedly signed the band for \$1.5 million, was initially reluctant. “Your conventional wisdom is that they’re a two-piece, they need a bass player, they’ve got this red-and-white gimmick, and the songs are fantastic, but they’re recorded very raw ... how is this going to be on radio?” he says. “But for me, it was like, the record’s amazing.”¹

Along with the Strokes and the Hives, the White Stripes are part of a back-to-basics real-rock revival awkwardly termed “neo-garage.” With roots in the ’60s stomp of teenage bands responding to the British Invasion, garage rock is about simple, direct catharsis. For years, this music was the province of aging coolsters, but neo-garage infuses that old sound with glam electricity. The duo hails from southwest Detroit, more specifically from a lower-middle-class Hispanic section uncomfortably referred to as Mexicantown. They claim to be the youngest off-spring in a family of ten children. They claim to have formed one day when Meg wandered into their parents’ attic and began playing Jack’s drum kit. This is not true. But this much is true: Mexicantown is where Jack White grew up and operated an upholstery shop, and Meg is from the same zip code; she once worked as a bartender at a blues bar in the trendy northern Detroit suburb of Royal Oak. Jack is twenty-six. Meg is twenty-seven. The White Stripes are “Detroit People,” and they are the most visible band in the Detroit garage-rock scene, a conglomeration of pals extending far beyond the Stripes themselves.

Detroit is full of underproduced, consciously primitive rock bands, all playing the same bar circuit; you could waste a weekend trying to name every band in the 313 area code (a lot of them can be found on the *Sympathetic Sounds of Detroit* compilation, which Jack White recorded in his living room). There are the Von Bondies, a sloppy, MC5-ish rave-up quartet, and the Clone Defects, an arty, quasi-metal band. Slumber Party are borderline shoegazers; the Come Ons play traditional ’60s-ish pop. The Dirtbombs bridge the gaps between glam, Detroit’s Motown past, and the blues-rock future. The Piranhas are destructo-punk and already legendary

for their “Rat Show” at a now-defunct club called the Gold Dollar in 1999 (their singer performed with a bloody, freshly executed rat duct-taped to his naked torso). The Detroit Cobras are probably the hottest band of the moment (and supposedly ignoring an avalanche of major labels trying to sign them). Yet the White Stripes remain the most conflicted of media darlings: unlike most of their blue-collar peers, they have a well-cultivated look, an artistic sensibility, and a mythology that makes the Stripes a *concept* as much as a band (almost like a garage-rock KISS). But the real reason they’re the biggest little rock group since Sonic Youth is more difficult to quantify: audiences hear something in their music that’s so fundamental it almost feels alien.

According to Jack, what they’re hearing is truth (or at least his version of it).

“We grew up in the late ’80s and ’90s, and what was good in rock ’n’ roll for those twenty years? Nothing, really. I guess I liked Nirvana,” White says. “And sometimes when you grow up around all these people who only listen to hip-hop, something inside of you just doesn’t connect with that. Some people will just kind of fall into that culture—you know, white people pretending to be black people or whatever²—because they’re involved in an environment where they want to fit in and they want to have friends, so they decide to like what everyone else likes and to dress how everyone else dresses. Meg and I never went along with it.”³

I try to get Meg to comment; she defers to Jack, smiles, and looks away. Meg seems really, really nice and really, really bored. She and Jack laugh at each other’s jokes, but they mostly behave like coworkers. I ask her how she feels about the way people have portrayed her—like when reporters infer profound metaphorical insight from her unwillingness to chat.

“Some people,” Meg says, “put more thought into shyness than necessary.”

Wendy Case is considerably less shy than Meg White.

In fact, Wendy Case is considerably less shy than David Lee Roth. She is the thirty-eight-year-old lead singer/guitarist for the Paybacks, a band Case describes as “hard pop.” Her hair is blond on top and brown underneath, she laughs like a ’73 Plymouth Scamp that refuses to turn over, and she can probably outdrink 90 percent of the men in Michigan. We are riding in her black Cherokee down Detroit’s Cass Corridor.

“If you’re gonna look for one unifying force [in the Detroit scene], the thing is that we all still drink,” Case says. “You get together and you drink beer, and you listen to music. That’s pretty much the nucleus of every social situation.”

The Cass Corridor is a strip of urban wretchedness jammed between the north shadow of Detroit’s skyline and Wayne State University. It’s basically a slum, filled with dive bars and homeless people who spend afternoons having animated conversations with the sky. This is where Detroit’s garage rock has flourished, so it’s no surprise that most of this town’s bands are no-nonsense buzzsaws. That said, the depth and intensity of their musical knowledge is surprising. The recent Dirtbombs album, *Ultraglide in Black*, is mostly covers (Stevie Wonder, Phil Lynott), and the Detroit Cobras’ *Life, Love and Leaving* is all covers.

“We’ll all sit around and listen to an old Supremes record or a Martha Reeves and the Vandellas record and marvel at the production level, especially considering how cheaply it was done,” says Eddie Harsch, a guy who used to play keyboards with the Black Crowes and currently plays bass for the Cobras. “People in Detroit know their records.”

This is certainly true for the Stripes, who pepper shows with Dolly Parton’s “Jolene,” Meg’s rendition of Loretta Lynn’s “Rated X,” and the menacing, tommy-gun riff of Link Wray’s “Jack the Ripper.”

Jack explains it this way: “We’ve never covered a song simply because it would be cool or because we’d seem really obscure for doing so. Certain circles of musicians will all get involved with the same record at the same time, and suddenly it will be cool to like the Kinks’ *Village Green Preservation Society* for a month. But why didn’t people feel that way three years ago? I’ve always hated the whole idea of record collectors who are obsessed with how obscure something is. Usually when somebody brings up something obscure, I assume it’s not very good, because—if it was—I would have heard it already. Record collectors are collecting. They’re not really listening to music.”

We talk a little longer. But then Jack does something odd: he reaches behind his waist and rips the tag off his black pants. It’s the type of weird moment that makes the Stripes so baffling and compelling. In and of itself, it’s not exactly mind-blowing that a guy ripped the tag off his pants. But this small, theatrical gesture punctuates Jack’s quote better than words ever could. It looks rehearsed, even though that’s impossible (it’s hard to

imagine Jack buys a new pair of trousers for every interview). Yet everything the White Stripes do raises a question. How can two media-savvy kids (posing as brother and sister and wearing Dr. Seuss clothes) represent blood-and-bones Detroit, a city whose greatest resource is asphalt?

“One time I was joking around with Jack,” recalls Detroit Cobras guitarist Maribel Restrepo, who lives ten minutes from where Jack resides in southwest Detroit. “And I said, ‘If you tell little white lies, they’ll only lead to more lies.’ And he goes, ‘You can’t even do that, because the minute you say anything, that’s all people will talk about. It gets to where you don’t want to say anything.’”

It’s not that less is more; it’s that less is everything. When Meg White hugs her pillow and tells me that people put more thought into shyness than necessary, I want to play along with her—even though she’s lying. It’s almost as if we don’t want to know the truth about the White Stripes. The lies are much better.

1. I have no fucking idea why rock magazines insist on interviewing “industry insiders” for these kinds of profiles. Are we really supposed to be surprised that the guy who runs the White Stripes’ record label thinks the White Stripes are awesome? The inclusion of this quote was not my idea.

2. In retrospect, I truly cannot fathom why this sentiment seemed so controversial at the time.

3. There's one other detail about Jack White that undoubtedly affected this piece: He doesn't trust the media, so his impulse is to contradict anyone he suspects is attempting to manipulate his image. This quality is rare. Most celebrities want to be lead, so they'll agree with any question that intimates an obvious answer; if you ask the average movie actor if his latest performance was more physically demanding than his previous roles, he'll almost always agree that it was (even if it wasn't). Most celebrities want the journalist to like them. White does not; his natural reaction is to disagree with whatever the question seems to suggest. For example, if a reporter says to him, "The guitar playing on this record reminds me of Led Zeppelin," White will immediately claim that he doesn't like Led Zeppelin and that the analogy is weak. However, if that same reporter had said, "Everyone thinks this album sounds like Led Zep, but I think it sounds more like the Stooges," White would say, "Oh really? I'm very influenced by Jimmy Page. This is our Zeppelin record." Within the context of any profile that's supposed to illustrate who he is as a person, there's nothing Jack White won't disagree with.

Someone Like You

I've probably written more about tribute bands than any sensible man should. I really like them, though. Tribute bands often reflect what I like about rock 'n' roll more than the authentic bands they replicate.

Dude Rocks Like a Lady (June 2005)

“In the days of my youth, I was told what it means to be a man,” yowls a waifish rock chick named Brooke Gengras, and three hundred lesbians know exactly what she means (even if I do not). While thundersticks detonate behind her, Brooke goes on to relate how she’s had her share of good times and her share of bad times, but she can’t seem to manufacture any concern about the woman who left her for a brown-eyed man; here again, the lesbians seem to agree completely. On the other side of the stage, a woman named Steph Payne is wearing dragon pants and carrying a Les Paul guitar and walking backward like Jimmy Page in *The Song Remains the Same*, although I don’t recall being able to see Jimmy’s black bra every time he reared his head back. Fifteen minutes from now, a woman in the audience will invade the stage and attempt to kiss Payne, but Payne will keep playing (in fact, she will play heavier).

You get the impression this has probably happened before.

We are inside the Supper Club in Times Square; there is a blizzard on the streets of Manhattan, but the amplifiers are melting inside. The Supper Club is hosting a semi-private party for Showtime’s lesbian soap opera *The L Word*, and we are experiencing the headline entertainment: Lez Zeppelin, an all-girl tribute to the greatest rock band ever to sing about *The Hobbit*. Tonight, Lez Zeppelin will play just four songs—“Good Times, Bad Times,” “Black Dog,” “Whole Lotta Love” (including the theremin solo), and “Rock and Roll.” Their replication of these songs is 80 percent flawless and 99 percent awesome. They sound like what would have happened if Heart had somehow written four songs that were all better than “Barracuda.” And there are a few jarring moments when it will feel like the most powerful all-female band in rock history is not the Runaways or L7 or Sleater-Kinney; it will feel like the most powerful all-female band in rock history is four women playing cock rock to a room full of hard-drinking, cable-subscribing lesbians. That might sound sexist (and perhaps it is), but it also might be true.

The rise of bands like Lez Zeppelin is the kind of multilayered cultural phenomenon that would make Camille Paglia so ecstatic that her brain would implode. The fact that women can play music originally written and performed by men—and that they can play this music so fluently—should not surprise anyone. What makes this noteworthy is their *choice* to play this music, especially since the majority of successful female tribute bands gravitate toward the most masculine, misogynistic music in pop history. It all feels “political,” somehow. Mötley Crüe glorified “Girls, Girls, Girls,” and so does the all-girl Crüe tribute Live Wire. Iron Maiden told mothers to bring their daughters to the slaughter, and L.A.’s Iron Maidens make the identical request. There is an all-girl Italian band called KISSexy that even includes a fifth member (she portrays replacement guitarist Vinnie Vincent), apparently so that they can play the KISS songs released after Ace Frehley quit in 1982, most notably “Lick It Up” (which is about licking) and “Fits Like a Glove” (which is not about gloves). And the question that might be even more compelling is why so many guys want to watch girls appropriating dude metal, particularly since the feminine reinvention of a song like “Custard Pie” significantly alters how intimately male audiences can relate to its message.

Steph Payne thinks she has the answer.

“I have this theory,” she tells me a few weeks after the *L Word* gig. “A contractor was going to do some work in my apartment, and I told him about our band. Well, he flipped out; he told me that he saw Zeppelin at Madison Square Garden in 1973. And this big contractor dude—this heavy-duty, heterosexual bricklayer—told me that Robert Plant was the only man he ever wanted to sleep with. My theory is that there were a lot of guys like this contractor: guys who were sexually turned on by Led Zeppelin, because Page and Plant were fucking beautiful. They were thin, they had long, flowing hair—they looked like girls. My theory is that a lot of male Zeppelin fans really *did* want to sleep with Led Zeppelin. So those kinds of guys love the fact that we’re girls, because they can watch us play those songs and still feel normal. They can actually go there in their mind without freaking themselves out.”

So perhaps this phenomenon is a little less political than it seems.

“We’ve had to kick guys out of our shows for jacking off,” Nici “Riff” Williams tells me, and I am not surprised. Williams plays bass in AC/DShe.

“He wasn’t just kicked out, but physically dragged out—in a daze—by guys who were a little bit more testosterone-driven than he was. We were playing in a place in Folsom, California, north of Sacramento. The venue has a balcony, and I guess this guy was sitting right above the stage, jacking off. One of the security guards saw him and started to kick his ass. He ended up getting dragged out of the place with his pants down.”

I am speaking with both Williams and Amy “Bonny Scott” Ward, the founding members of San Francisco’s best-known, all-female tribute to pre-1980 AC/DC. Unlike many of their tribute peers, AC/DShe is not a collection of career musicians who decided to scrap their original bands in the hope of making more money as begrudging copycats; AC/DShe is the *only* band Williams and Ward have ever played in. Williams, in fact, had never even picked up a bass until she thought up the name AC/DShe and decided such a group needed to exist. It is not that these women merely love AC/DC—they actually feel a responsibility to make AC/DC more popular. This is their religion.

“Our ultimate goal is to spread the gospel of AC/DC,” explains Ward. “We are trying to turn people on to AC/DC. A lot of young kids come to our shows. They’ve never seen AC/DC, but they’ve grown up on AC/DC because of their parents. There’s nothing cooler than playing to a shitload of kids in the front row—kids who are nine or ten, wearing AC/DC shirts, singing all the words. I know that sounds fucking corny, but it’s cool. The second goal is to eventually meet AC/DC. I mean, if we could meet AC/DC, then we’ve achieved everything. And being in this band gives them a reason to *want* to meet us. Otherwise, we’re just a couple of bimbos going to an AC/DC show, trying to make it backstage. This is the proper way to meet your heroes.”

AC/DShe’s motivations are both modest (i.e., meeting a popular rock band) and abstract (making one of the world’s most popular bands more popular). This curious brand of pragmatism is probably central to their success—and within the limited confines of the tribute idiom, AC/DShe is just about as successful as possible. They have played to five thousand people in Chicago and more than ten thousand miscreants at biker rallies; they’ve been flown to Wales to perform at AC/DC’s Big Ball, an international festival celebrating the music of Australia’s most precious metal. Curiously, they are not the only all-female AC/DC tribute in America; there are at least four others, and Seattle’s Hell’s Belles are

(arguably) just as famous as AC/DShe. Yet Hell's Belles are not AC/DShe's main musical rivals, even though they should be. AC/DShe's main musical rival is Zepparella.

As you may have guessed, Zepparella is another all-female Zeppelin tribute. Two of the women in Zepparella—their lead guitarist and drummer—joined after leaving AC/DShe. It is a complicated situation. These former members of AC/DShe (“Phyllis Rudd” and “Agnes Young”) also play in an original band called Bottom, which has opened shows for Zepparella. They wanted to do this while remaining in AC/DShe, which Williams and Ward saw as unacceptable. Both women were reticent to discuss this (inarguably unique) rivalry, but it's clear that some feelings remain bruised.

“The one thing that I will say,” Ward adds cautiously, “is that we've always been on the up and up with those girls. We had been playing with them for three years, and it was great. Zepparella is a completely different thing, and a completely different audience. But I do think it's really fucking hard when your Angus Young is also Jimmy Page. I think that the image we portray—you know, the idea that we're doing this simply because we're huge AC/DC fans—would have been tarnished a little bit.”

Ward's argument is that someone wanting to simultaneously play in an AC/DC tribute *and* a Led Zeppelin tribute is precisely what she hates about other cover bands: that they are not serious about the music they lionize, and that it's simply a financial decision. They are only in it for the money. Ward and Williams (along with AC/DShe rhythm guitarist “Sarracuda” Young) remain focused on what they feel is most important, namely (a) delivering dirty deeds at cut-rate prices; and (b) consistently re-creating Bon Scott's last night on earth. AC/DShe may be better at *drinking* like AC/DC than they are at *sounding* like AC/DC. Their rider requests almost nothing beyond Budweiser and Maker's Mark, which they guzzle throughout their performances. Williams notes that there is no bass line during the first and second verse of “Highway to Hell,” thereby allowing her to shotgun two beers during one song (“That's kind of my bass solo,” she says). These are, in many ways, the kind of women that male AC/DC fans dream about meeting. And though that is not AC/DShe's singular aspiration, it's not something they're ashamed of.

“Some other tribute acts do take this all-girl thing to a totally different level,” Ward says. “We were never trying to be political. We would never say, ‘We're chicks and we can rock, too!’ I mean, *of course* chicks can rock.

But there are other all-girl bands where that is absolutely their agenda, and they're feminists and they make feminist statements. We've been asked to play at political events and to do fund-raisers, but we always say no. Our agenda is to have no agenda. Rock 'n' roll has nothing to do with politics. Even if we *agree* with the politics, we still refuse to do those events, because AC/DC would never do anything like that."

Seven years before he sired the fourth-most famous Stroke, Albert Hammond wrote a song about how it never rains in Southern California; according to Hammond's paradoxical lyrics, it actually pours. And it is pouring tonight in Los Angeles as I walk toward Club Vodka to see Cheap Chick, SoCal's finest (and presumably only) all-female Cheap Trick tribute. I am not sure what they will look like, but they are easy to spot: I see four women freaking out over a Nissan mini-van, and one of them is wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap and checkerboard sneakers. I walk over to say hello and anticipate meeting four twenty-five-year-old ironists, but these are not the people I encounter. The reason they are freaking out over this minivan is because someone just gave it to them. It was a gift from Nissan, and it's precisely the kind of gift they need.

You see, Cheap Chick are soccer moms.

Well, not all of them, I suppose; only two of them have kids. However, everybody in Cheap Chick is a little older—and a little more sensible—than I expect. "I'm Kristi and I'm forty-one, and I'm proud of being forty-fucking-one," says Kristi Callan, lead singer and mother of two. "I play Robin Zander, and I also edit books for money. I do whatever I can to make money."

It seems that someone from Nissan is a fan of Cheap Chick, so he decided to give them a Nissan Quest as an innovative form of viral marketing: he apparently hopes to rebrand the concept of *soccer moms* into the hipper category of *rocker moms*. The members of Cheap Chick seemed like ideal candidates for such an evolution. "Nissan's target market is active moms," says bassist Pamita Neptuna, who also has two children. "They want to appeal to the kind of woman who would be in a rock band. We're not unusual for a band, but we're unusual for moms." As such, the members of Cheap Chick now share a complimentary \$30,000 vehicle that would be perfect for touring, if they did, in fact, tour. Which (of course) is something

they can't really do, because somebody has to drag the kids to soccer practice twice a week. It's a vicious circle.

Neptuna is the reason Cheap Chick became a reality; the band was her idea, and she handles all the publicity and booking. "My talent does not lie with being a phenomenal bass player," she says. "My true talent is talking people into doing stupid things."

All four members of Cheap Chick had previous careers in music, but all four now hold day jobs. During the 1980s, Callan was in a Bangles-esque group called Wednesday Week who were briefly label mates with the likes of Poison on Enigma Records. In the '90s, drummer Judy Cocuzza played with the cartoonish, all-girl punk-metal outfit Betty Blow-torch (in Cheap Chick, she calls herself Bunni Carlos—a play on Cheap Trick's Bun E. Carlos that can only be appreciated on paper). Guitarist Robin Beacham is both the quietest and sexiest member of the band, and inadvertently the most confusing: because her real first name is Robin, people always assume she portrays singer Robin Zander, even though she actually portrays Rick Nielsen. This is the kind of dilemma nontribute acts never have to worry about. Beacham joined Cheap Chick after declining an opportunity to personify Tony Iommi in the all-female Black Sabbath tribute Mistresses of Reality.

Perhaps because of their ages—or maybe just because of their collective worldview—Cheap Chick seem detached from all the gender-based questions that typically hound any group of women who play music created by men. Though they concede that part of their audience simply wants to watch hot women playing rock music, they find that neither interesting nor insulting. "Growing up, I never thought that I was a girl playing the drums and that there were also guys who played the drums," claims Cocuzza. "I always just thought, *I play the drums*. It took me a long time to realize that everybody else thinks I'm a girl. I mean, I'm *aware* that I'm a girl, but it never made a difference to me."

That's a good attitude, especially since Club Vodka is (more or less) a strip club. The bar features two stages: one for Cheap Chick and one for cheap chicks. I assume the strippers will take a break during Cheap Chick's set, but they do not; they inexplicably perform throughout the entire concert. It's a confounding dissonance: while one woman rips through the solo to "Southern Girls" and flicks guitar picks into a mixed audience of 150, another woman (who's literally a Southern girl from Alabama) uses

those same riffs to slither like a python against a cold metallic pole. During “He’s a Whore,” a brunette stripper jumps on the main stage and tries to molest a visibly uncomfortable Beacham, forcing the guitarist to constantly flee the dancer’s ridiculously fake breasts. The rest of the band finds this hilarious. It’s almost like a bachelorette party, except the soundtrack is power pop.

Cheap Chick close the night with “Surrender” and “Dream Police.” Outside on Melrose Avenue, it’s still pouring. It’s a good thing that this Nissan has antilock brakes.

The first night I watch Lez Zeppelin perform, I presume they are all lesbians. This seems like a valid assumption, inasmuch as (a) they were performing at a party for *The L Word*, and (b) they are in a band called Lez Zeppelin. After I interview the band in a Manhattan rehearsal space, I decide that my initial math was wrong; I decide that two of them are lesbians and two of them are not. When I see them a third time, I realize that three of them are totally straight (and at least two are totally married). In fact, they might *all* be straight, for all I know. This is their “mystery,” much like the way the real Led Zeppelin refused to admit whether or not they had sold their souls to the devil in order to receive supernatural rocking power and/or a higher royalty rate from Atlantic Records.

“Definitely maybe not,” says drummer Wendy Kershen when I first ask if Lez Zeppelin are predominantly (or partially) homosexual. “But maybe. Maybe, or maybe not. Actually, I had to have a sex change to join this band.”

As it turns out, the name Lez Zeppelin is a marketing tool. According to the band, it was simply the cleverest linguistic manipulation they could think of. However, it’s clear that Payne—a former rock writer for *NME* and *Rolling Stone*—understands exactly what she is doing. “Our gender is definitely an important part of what we do, but it doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with us being lesbians,” she says. “There is certainly some unusual power in the idea of girls playing this particular music, and that doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not those girls are gay or straight. It’s just the profound intensity of females playing cock rock.”

Because Lez Zeppelin live in New York City, they exist in something of a bubble; they don’t face much artistic opposition. On the West Coast, Cheap Chick and AC/DShe are surrounded by the hordes of tribute acts (both male

and female) who now dominate the Sunset Strip (on the same night I saw Cheap Chick, the opening band was Nirvana tribute Penny Royal—and both were competing against nearby shows by the Skid Row tribute Monkey Business, the Black Sabbath tribute Wicked World, the ELP tribute Knife Edge, and the Rolling Stones tribute Sticky Fingers). This is not the case in New York, where the scene is less visible. Payne found Kershen by placing an advertisement in *Drummer Girl* magazine; in a bizarre (and possibly unbelievable) case of serendipity, Kershen had just given up on forming an original band and locked herself inside a studio, hoping to learn John Bonham's drum fills. Payne (who once toured as a backing musician for erstwhile girl grouper Ronnie Spector) had already hooked up with Lisa Brigantino, who—weirdly—played bass, organ, and mandolin, which happen to be all the same instruments John Paul Jones played in Zeppelin. What's even more coincidental is that Brigantino delivers the kind of droll commentary you'd expect to hear from John Paul Jones, assuming J.P.J. wasn't British and possessed ovaries: she is entirely professional and relentlessly understated.

“When Steph told me about her idea to play this music—which I was familiar with, but not to the extent of the other three—it intrigued me, and it seemed like a challenge,” Brig-antino says, slightly bored by the question. “It seemed like a way to increase my musicianship, and it created an opportunity to play several instruments every night. Historically, women in rock are rarely seen as instrumentalists, and that is what we're trying to achieve. These songs are intricate and heavy and wonderful to play. As someone who grew up playing a lot of different instruments, I caught a lot of flak from guys and always felt this pressure to prove myself, simply because I was a woman and no one expected me to be any good.”

As Brigantino explains her motives for reinventing “Trampled Underfoot” for audiences who reflexively adore the original, the meaning of Lez Zeppelin (once again) starts to seem philosophical; she is trying to prove a point, and that point is tangibly tied to her femininity. So maybe this trend does mean something; maybe all-female tribute bands really *are* political. But then I start chatting with Lez singer Brooke Gengras, and I realize I may be overthinking all of this. There is a point to Lez Zeppelin, but it has nothing to do with the *Lez* and everything to do with the *Zeppelin*.

“This band is just so fun, and it's because I fucking love Led Zeppelin, man.” Gengras calls herself “Roberta Plant” and wears '86 Air Jordans. If

asked to describe her enthusiasm, the key modifier would be *unbridled*. “I mean, I fucking love John Bonham, but I’m never gonna get to play with him, and my other band isn’t going to sit around and play fucking Zeppelin covers all night, so fuck it.”

Roberta Plant looks a little like Parker Posey; her other band is called Easy, but this band is easier. All she has to do is sing the songs that changed her life. And if men (or women) want to watch her do that simply because she’s a woman, that’s fine; being a woman doesn’t have any impact on why she loves *Physical Graffiti* and *In Through the Out Door*.

“Actually, the hardest thing is just memorizing the lyrics,” she says. “When I was learning ‘Stairway to Heaven,’ I had to close my eyes and create this entire movie in my head—I had to come up with this entire visual fucking thing, just so I could fucking remember all six verses of this weird-ass shit. I had to look up *hedgerow* in the dictionary.”

Well, so did the rest of us.

Fargo Rock City, For Real

I am including the following story for two reasons, neither of which is, “Because it’s good.” In many ways (in fact, in *most* ways), this story is horrible. It was my attempt to explain the Fargo, North Dakota, “rock scene” when I was twenty-three years old. In retrospect, it now reads like a satire of daily newspaper entertainment reporting, which was certainly not my intention at the time. But that’s also what’s kind of cool about it; the description of all the 1995 bands in Fargo (and its sister city, Moorhead, Minnesota) is probably pretty close to the rock scene of *every* small-market town in 1995. If you spent the middle part of the ’90s in, say, Little Rock, Arkansas (or Des Moines, Iowa, or Boise, Idaho, or anywhere with a population below 200,000), you could probably delete all the artists’ names and replace them with any of the going-nowhere bands who happened to be playing in your hometown. The article wouldn’t make any less sense (or be any less accurate).

The other reason I like this story is because 1995 was a goofy cultural moment for pop music; by ’95, alternative rock had been completely mainstreamed by every element of society (even in North Dakota). However, young musicians still looked to punk and grunge as a way to identify themselves as “underground.” Which was hilarious, since trying to be underground by liking alt rock in 1995 would have been like trying to be underground in 1978 by liking Boston.

I have added copious footnotes to this story where they were necessary, which is pretty much everywhere.

TO BE SCENE, OR NOT TO BE SEEN

UNDERGROUND ROCK IS ALIVE

AND LOUD IN FARGO-MOORHEAD ...

BUT WHO'S LISTENING?

(SEPTEMBER 1995)

Whenever you get into a discussion about the Fargo-Moorhead music climate,¹ the word you most often hear is not *alternative*, *hardcore*, *grunge*, or even *music*. The word you hear the most is *scene*. Regardless of whether the context is positive (“We’ve really got a nice scene developing here”), negative (“Those kids are just into the scene without caring about the music”), or merely expository (“Our band seems to get slagged on by a lot of the local scenesters”), the F-M alt-movement² is obsessed with the concept of establishing an underground scene—the people, the atmosphere, and the perceptions that go hand-in-hand with subterranean rock ‘n’ roll.³

It’s probably the clearest local illustration of youth culture: the backbone of the establishment is created by kids under eighteen, and the major players are all in their early to midtwenties. Outsiders tend to view this faction as “the Ralph’s Bar⁴ punk clique,” which really isn’t accurate. Contemporary punk rock is more of a philosophy than a sound,⁵ and—unlike the late-’70s British scene—it doesn’t have much to do with fashion.⁶ Modern punk is just stripped-down, straightforward music with no frills and few compromises.⁷ How accurately that label fits the F-M music fraternity is unclear; some bands are straightforward simply because they lack talent, and some are uncompromising because they’re never in a position to be tempted by success. Nonetheless, the current status of the F-M music scene is thriving.⁸ As the gap between mainstream and alternative culture closes, more and more young people are drawn to what grassroots, underground rock represents.

There is also a solid base of local musicians; although promoter Jade Nielson admits the scene has grown stagnant,⁹ he thinks the level of virtuosity has never been higher. “There has kind of been an overkill because there have been too many shows without enough different bands,” Nielson¹⁰ said. “But, at this point in time, there’s no question that there is more talent in town than ever before, simply because the musicians are a little older and more mature.”

Nielson tends to get most of the credit for shaping the current musical direction of Fargo-Moorhead, and it’s easy to understand why. The twenty-

four-year-old promoter has turned the back room of Ralph's Bar in Moorhead into one of the Midwest's premier underground venues; in the past year, he's produced shows by Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Southern Culture on the Skids, Mule, Railroad Jerk, and last Monday's Killdozer concert (as well as an outdoor summer rock festival headlined by the Jesus Lizard¹¹). He began seriously promoting bands in 1993 at the now-defunct Elks Club in downtown Fargo.

"When I first starting doing these shows—especially the all-ages shows—it didn't matter who was playing. The audience was basically kids who wanted to hang out with their friends and be seen, along with a small core who were really into the music. We'd get a bigger crowd if I brought in somebody established, like Arcwelder,¹² but it was basically the same people going to every show," Nielson said. "Now, the crowd is definitely affected by the music itself. People are picking and choosing what they'll pay to hear. I even see that at Ralph's."

In terms of influence, however, the biggest single show was probably put on by rival promoter Bjorn Christianson and GodheadSilo¹³ drummer Dan Haug. Their 1991 Fugazi concert at the Elks is consistently mentioned as the primary catalyst for the subsequent proliferation of F-M hardcore interest.

"I think we had about five hundred people at that show, which was a surprise to both of us. I know a lot of people seem to consider that a starting point for what has happened since, but I don't," Christianson¹⁴ said. "I think this whole situation predates the Fugazi¹⁵ show, and by quite a bit. Things around here really started with bands like Floored and Hammer-head and Buttchuck.¹⁶ I think Floored started playing live in the late '80s." Not surprisingly, locating the conception of Fargo's scene depends on who you want to use as a source. Several contemporary scenesters cited a teen center on Fargo's Fiechtner Drive called Exit 99 as the catalyst. Before closing in 1992, Exit 99 was home to several noteworthy shows such as Cop Shoot Cop and Bikini Kill. It acted as the breeding ground for the current generation of local artists.

"Exit 99¹⁷ was done well, and it was done professionally. And—for a lot of bands in town—that was the first place they played at. But it turned into too much of a young kids' club," Nielson said. "Since they couldn't serve

alcohol, it was hard to get college students to go there. A lot of the time, it was just teenagers who were sitting around and smoking cigarettes.”

In reality, the “scene” has probably always existed in one form or another. *Yahtzene* editor Phil Leitch (at the ripe old age of twenty-six) is considered the oldest active member of the Fargo underground. “I would certainly say there was a scene before the 1990s. For me, the scene began in about 1984, but there were a lot less people involved,” Leitch¹⁸ said. “I put on a show in 1985—the band was called Vampire Lesbos—and I think about a hundred people showed up.”

At least superficially, the so-called scene has more members now than ever before. There’s no question about the current popularity of underground culture, and that’s exactly what this local movement offers young people. However, there are some problems. Fargo-Moorhead has a limited number of bands in the area, and they play so often that the novelty has worn off. Moreover, they’re forced to play at the same places over and over (this area has very few available venues). The biggest problem is probably a question of sincerity; while most of the bands are fairly serious about playing, it’s hard to gauge if the audiences are interested in the music or just the trendiness of the spectacle. Dean Sime¹⁹ manages Disc & Tape Masters in Fargo and produces a public-access video program called *Eyeball Injection*. He perceives a predictable schism in the local punk packs and questions the amount of sonic diversity from the musicians.

“Like any scene, it’s divided. There are certain bands that have legitimate followings—Orange 17 has an excellent following, Bossk has a growing following, and Seven O’clock Sucker has a good following. But there are still a lot of people going to these shows who just want to be seen,” Sime said. “I think interest in the scene may be growing, but that goes along with the growth of alternative culture. The problem is that—musically—the number of bands is shrinking. There are fewer bands in town than there were two years ago, and only five or six of them play consistently. It also seems like the bands aren’t writing enough new songs, and too many of their songs sound alike.”

With its fuzzy past and vague present,²⁰ speculating on the future of the F-M scene is virtually impossible. Leitch thinks local interest is fading and doubts if any major shows could succeed in the near future. Christianson was more optimistic and said the class of young bands currently emerging in the area is more exciting and experimental than ever before. For someone

like Brian Eveslage, however, the dynamic of the scene is ultimately inconsequential. Eveslage plays guitar for Bossk and was formerly in Blockhead and Haul. As far as he's concerned, it's not his job to figure out who likes his music.

"I have no idea who our audience is. A lot of our friends go to the shows, I guess. When we play all-ages shows, the audience tends to be younger, but—since we usually play at Ralph's Bar—it's hard for me to gauge," Eveslage said. "There may be fewer bands right now than there were a couple of years ago, but the ones who are left are more serious. The bands who managed to stick around aren't just playing for the hell of it."²¹

[What follows is the completely unnecessary sidebar to this story.]

• • •

So who are all of these local underground bands? That's a valid question. Here's a painfully pithy description of a dozen bands that bounce around the area. (Readers note: It's possible some of these bands no longer exist or have changed names; it's often difficult to tell if a band is dead or merely inactive at the moment.)

Orange 17²²: The most popular local act in town, especially among junior high kids. They seem to have a sense of humor (they ended last Monday's set with "Smokin' in the Boys Room"), and many people think their vocalist looks like Kurt Cobain.

Bossk²³: A classic hardcore trio. Their bass player is a little scary.

Standard²⁴: Bossk, but without the guitar player.

Bootlick²⁵: An unorthodox blues-grunge band.

Bombshell: The best-known all-female punk trio in Fargo history.²⁶

John Smith: In July of 1994, local promoter Jade Nielson predicted John Smith would "take over the world."

Seven O'clock Sucker: The prototypical garage band. I'm pretty sure their drummer is from Milnor, ND, and—if I recall correctly—he used to have a decent jump shot in high school.^{[27](#)}

Gummi: Definitely not a punk band,^{[28](#)} as they supposedly dig KISS.

Pathos: A South Fargo band, described by Bombshell drummer Sarah Hassell as “underrated.”

Martian: A West Fargo high school outfit. They're cutting a seven-inch on Meat Records.^{[29](#)}

Whirl: A high school skater band.^{[30](#)}

Trans Am: Yet another high school skater band. Karl Qualey of Orange 17 (a.k.a. the aforementioned Cobain clone^{[31](#)}) once said he was a fan of their music.

1. Which I'm sure happens to you all the time.

2. It remains unclear what this movement was the “alternative” to ... I suppose going to the mall, although I recall seeing a lot of these same rock kids at JCPenney.

3. In retrospect, it is hard to understand why anyone would actively try to “establish” other people’s “perceptions,” but it seemed like it at the time.

[4.](#) This was a bar in Moorhead where all the local punk bands performed, but it also hosted some surprising national acts, most notably a very early performance by the White Stripes. When the city decided to destroy Ralph's in 2004, someone tried to make a documentary film about the bar that would somehow save it from destruction. I was drunkenly interviewed for this documentary, and I think I may have claimed I saw this aforementioned White Stripes show. I did not.

5. Trenchant!

6. This was not the only difference.

7. Jesus Christ.

8. Sort of.

9. Despite the fact that I just called it “thriving.”

[10](#). At the time I wrote this story, Jade Nielson was perceived as the hippest person in Fargo. Considering how young he was at the time, it seemed rather amazing that he could actually convince shitty communist grindcore bands like Killdozer to play in North Dakota. The key, as it turns out, was geography. Bands would have dates in Minneapolis and Missoula, and they needed a place to perform in between. Jade was apparently the first human who ever figured this out.

[11](#). This was Jade's biggest gambit. The event was earnestly called something along the lines of "Fargo-palooza," and it was an all-day outdoor show on the banks of the Red River. Unfortunately, the success of the event was dependent on walk-up ticket sales, and the show happened to fall on an afternoon when it was over 95 degrees. Hardly anyone showed up, and it was a financial disaster. The entire scene kind of caved in soon after (at least for a while). The Jesus Lizard were pretty awesome, though.

[12](#). Arcwelder was never particularly beloved by anyone except bookish dudes working at college radio stations, but they were still “established,” somehow. They also had cross-demographic name recognition, since most farm kids in North Dakota know how to arc weld.

[13.](#) GodheadSilo was a local drum-bass two-piece who actually moved to Seattle and were signed by Sub Pop. With the exception of Kid Jonny Lang, I suppose this makes them the most successful North Dakota rock act of the past twenty-five years.

14. This guy was really blond and snarky.

[15](#). I am often prone to make fun of Fugazi, but I must give them credit: they really would play anywhere, and they'd play for virtually no money. It seemed like at least one member of every band in Fargo-Moorhead saw this particular concert. What's interesting is the scene's second-most influential moment was the 1994 Jon Spencer show, which prompted many of the acts in Fargo to combine Fugazi with the Blues Explosion. The problem was that all of those bands dreamed of moving to Minneapolis and signing with Amphetamine Reptile Records, so they also tried to play like Helmet. As a consequence, many bands at Ralph's Bar seemed like superheavy, straight-edge power trios with unorthodox taste in trousers.

16. This is still a pretty excellent band name, all things considered.

17. The most interesting thing about Exit 99 was something that didn't happen in 1991: An unknown group scheduled a date to play there in the middle of the week, but they canceled at the last minute, supposedly because their debut album was starting to get a little media attention and their itinerary was being reconstructed. This was a minor tragedy, since (a) the show would have probably drawn less than twelve people, and (b) the band was Pearl Jam.

[18](#). This person still lives in Fargo, and he still hassles me whenever I go back. His zine was pretty great (or at least it seemed that way at the time). He had a feud with the band Orange 17, so he was consistently publishing a list called, “Things I would rather do than see Orange 17 perform live.” I particularly remember one of these lists, because #5 was, “See a movie with *Forum* film critic Chuck Klosterman” and #6 was, “Have the worst sex of my life, get AIDS, and die.” This remains the most insightful literary criticism I’ve ever received.

[19](#). This is the guy I sold my used CDs to. He would give me four dollars for almost anything, including reggae compilations. As far as I'm concerned, that qualified him as an expert on just about everything. He knew (and knows) a metric ton about music, but I think he eventually became a plumber.

20. Fuck. I was a really, really wretched person.

21. Actually, they were.

[22](#). What made Orange 17 awesome was how so many people in Fargo hated them for their success. This is a band who never made an album, never went on tour, and never made any money. However, they once opened for Ted Nugent and Bad Company at the Fargodome (they were the replacement for a national band who got sick). In a way, Orange 17 truly were a little ahead of their time; they loved hair metal ironically when absolutely nobody else did, and—had they emerged ten years later—I suppose they could have been a second-tier version of the Darkness. The band was also hurt by the fact that vocalist Karl Qualey—as mentioned above—looked too much like Kurt Cobain, and everyone thought he was doing it on purpose. In truth, it was just a weird coincidence. He really just needed a different barber.

23. And by “scary” I meant “bald.”

24. Played the same songs, though.

25. I never saw this band, ever.

[26](#). Inspired by Tiger Trap!

[27](#). This was true. The drummer's last name was Jensen, and he (and his older brother) symbolized key elements of small-town, North Dakota basketball folklore: the noble tradition of high-scoring five-foot-six-inch jump shooters. These two Jensen brothers would come off the bench for Milnor, hide in the corner against zone defenses, and inevitably drain three or four 3-pointers every single night. It was profoundly frustrating for all their opponents, because those Jensen boys were short and slow and (kind of) chubby. But undersized fat kids often thrive on the hardwood floors of rural North Dakota. There was another school in a community called Marion, ND, that had two families with the surname Trapp (these families might have even been named "Von Trapp," although that might be wishful thinking on my part). This was a tiny town—maybe 250 people total—and their high school gym was the size of a four-car garage. It was probably only sixty feet long. As such, these Trapp boys—all of whom were under five foot eight—would regularly launch jump shots from half court in the middle of a game. This was impossible to defend, because your natural psychological instinct was not to cover any kid inexplicably shooting from beyond midcourt. The most talented Trapp was a cocky, curly-haired fellow named Tori Trapp, and he averaged something like thirty-three points a game without ever going inside the lane. The summer after he graduated from high school, Tori Trapp made out with a girl at a keg party who would later become my girlfriend. I guess I have a lot of unresolved issues with this dude.

28. This was gleaned from their handwritten press release.

[29](#). Now defunct.

[30](#). As opposed to an Adult-Oriented Skater band (AOS).

31. For some reason, I really tried to ram this point home.

Q: You are given the chance to control what your legacy will be. You can't *specifically* dictate how you will be recalled by future generations, but You are given the chance to choose between two general idioms of legacies.

The first kind of legacy ("option A") would be that you lived your days as a good, honest person who worked hard and contributed to society. However, the limitation of this legacy will be that almost no one will know or remember this information (including future members of your own extended family). Most average people will never even know you lived.

The second kind of legacy ("option B") will be familiar to almost everyone in the world for centuries to come. However, this legacy will be extremely strange and neutral; it will be an obscure fact that has almost nothing to do with your tangible day-to-day life (the best comparison being the legacy of General Tso Tsungtang, an extremely gifted and successful military leader during the seventeenth-century Qing Dynasty who is now exclusively remembered as the namesake for the popular Chinese dish General Tso's chicken).

Which legacy do you want?

Singularity

Remember Jessica McClure? That little Texas girl who fell down a well in 1987? She's seventeen now, and I'm assuming she's pretty goddamn sick of people bringing that incident up. And I'm sure they do it constantly. I bet old friends call her and say things like "Oh, hi, Jessica. Funny story. Last night, I was listening to a Terence Trent D'Arby album, and when I heard that song 'Wishing Well,' I totally thought about the time you fell into that well, so I thought I'd give you a jingle." This is the kind of thing that happens when people associate one event with your entire life.

I have a similar problem: everyone I've ever met seems to know that I like KISS. Everyone. I have come to realize that liking KISS will ultimately be the only thing anybody will remember about me. I have no doubt that if I died today, whoever was to engrave my tombstone would chisel something along the lines of

Charles J. Klosterman
1972–2005:
"He preferred *Animalize*
to *Lick It Up*."

The problem with being closely associated with KISS (or with any singular entity) is not that people know this particular fact. The problem is that people assume there are no other facts (about anything) that would possibly interest you. Acquaintances are endlessly telling me rudimentary trivia about KISS, which is a little hard to reconcile, since these same people inevitably tell me things they must assume I already know. For example, if someone is aware that I know which tracks on *Destroyer* include uncredited guitar playing by Dick Wagner ("Sweet Pain," "Great Expectations," and "Flaming Youth"), why would this same person feel obligated to inform me that KISS is currently touring with Aerosmith? I mean, I get VH1, too. I own a microwave. I don't live at the bottom of a well. But these are the kinds of things people feel they must tell me.

Consequently, I was not surprised to receive somewhere between six and eighteen thousand e-mails the day after Gene Simmons announced that he was releasing a new solo album next year and that one of the songs (“Waiting for the Morning Light”) would be cowritten by Bob Dylan. This is significant news to someone like me, a longtime lobbyist for KISS songs that fall outside the conventional KISS paradigm. I’m a big supporter of the (highly Advanced) collaborations between KISS and Lou Reed on the 1981 concept album *Music from the Elder*, a work that I consider the fourth-best KISS studio effort of all time. I do not find the Simmons-Dylan collaboration surprising. In fact, it shouldn’t be surprising to anyone. Their partnership simply illustrates that rock ’n’ roll has reached its logical conclusion and no longer needs to exist.

Here is the entire history of rock music, recounted in one paragraph: rock music did not exist until the release of *Meet the Beatles* in January 1964. From that time until 1970, the Beatles were simultaneously the most artistically gifted and commercially successful rock artists on the planet. Then they broke up. And at that point, rock split into two opposing ideologies; there were now two kinds of music. The prime directive of the first kind of rock was to be meaningful and important; the prime directive of the second was to entertain people and move product. The first category comprises elements (Springsteen, punk rock, early U2, Chris Carrabba, etc.) that followed a template built by Dylan in the 1960s. The second category comprises things (Elton John, disco, everything the Stones did post-*Some Girls*, Michael Jackson, et al.) that followed the path KISS chose when they formed in 1973. This era includes two exceptions, which are Led Zeppelin and Prince; everything else fits into either category A or category B. And that is the entire history of rock music, completely condensed into one paragraph.

But now, that’s all over. Rock ’n’ roll has come full circle: the genre’s most genuine, most credible individual has joined forces with the genre’s most entrepreneurial, most self-consciously contrived individual. Rock ’n’ roll has not been destroyed; it has been solved. This, of course, will make it significantly harder to put out a rock magazine, but I’m sure we’ll think of something. Tune in next month, when this column will begin covering ... oh, I don’t know. Maybe horse racing.

—SPIN, 2004

Oh, the Guilt

1 It's fascinating and stupid to watch adults destroy things on purpose. It's a sensation that applies to a multitude of stimuli: monster truck shows, the dynamiting of sports arenas, race riots, Van Halen's musical legacy, eggs, governments, and temporary gods. And guitars. Always guitars. You absolutely cannot destroy enough guitars within the course of your career; Pete Townshend tried, but that still didn't stop him from getting wrongly accused of pedophilia or thinking that "Squeeze Box" was clever. People wreck guitars to illustrate how important guitars are supposed to be, aggressively reminding us that these are the machines that kill fascists. Sadly, this axiom has proven to be mostly inaccurate; according to the most recent edition of the *World Book Almanac*, the number of fascists killed in guitar-related assassinations continues to hover near zero.

"It seemed like Nirvana *had* to smash their instruments," Mudhoney front man Mark Arm supposedly said about Kurt Cobain. "It was really dumb. A roadie would remove all of the mics from the drum kit so they wouldn't get hurt. What the fuck?" Arm was talking about the '92 version of Nirvana, a group who had not yet begun recording *In Utero* but who'd already begun to lose track of how rich they were. However, the band had been preoccupied with destroying their own equipment long before their fiscal windfall: Nirvana annihilated their set at a show at Evergreen College way back in 1988.¹ They would regularly wreck their own possessions while touring in support of *Bleach*, an album that (initially) sold thirty-five thousand copies and only appealed to slow-witted stoners and big-picture A & R representatives. "When we started smashing our equipment it was out of frustration, because I felt like we weren't playing very well," Cobain explained. "People expect it also. Give the kids what they want."

This is true. This is true, sort of.

2 *In Utero* was the first album actively promoted as a product I needed to buy *because* I was not going to like it. The wanting and the hating were

somehow related. That's all I remember about waiting for the release of that record: Over and over again, I was informed about how much I was going to hate this album and how I would never want to play it, supposedly because it would be so challenging and corrosive that it wouldn't sound like music. It would have no relationship to melody or metal or capitalism. There seemed to be a lot of people arguing about this possibility in public (and they were always the same people), and they would all inevitably say the exact opposite of whatever they had allegedly argued in the past (in fact, it always seemed like their contradictory statements could only be found retrospectively in the denials). Following a lead in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsweek* raised doubt over whether Geffen Records would allow the album to be released as it was recorded. This was during an era when people still cared what *Newsweek* reported about rock music. The vortex of the controversy stemmed from Cobain's selection of Steve Albini as the *In Utero* producer—an abrasive, ethical man whose legacy is built on crafting sonically authentic records that normal people hate. The word that kept being connected to the project was *unlistenable*. The vocals were going to be “low in the mix” (which meant nothing to me at the time) and everything was apparently going to sound like the Jesus Lizard covering a Pixies album inside Mechagodzilla (except not good). Cobain insisted *In Utero* would sell “a quarter as much” as 1991's *Nevermind*, a nonarbitrary estimate that could be taken to mean Cobain figured 75 percent of his audience did not care about incendiary sonic experiences. “The grown-ups don't like it,” he told Nirvana biographer Michael Azerrad, the assumption being that “the grown-ups” were the faceless executives at Geffen who had (somehow) hoped that Nirvana was going to bring in twelve new songs that sounded like Aerosmith's “Crazy.” The accuracy of this assertion remains unclear. Later, in 1994, Cobain delivered an uncharacteristically lucid and relaxed interview to a French video outlet called *Metal Express* where he merely said, “I think the general consensus was that the album may not sell as much, so they were concerned with that. But they never, ever once put any pressure on us. They just basically told us their feelings about the record. Most people don't like the record. A lot of my friends don't even like the record.” He seemed intellectually satisfied by that distaste. And while I'm sure the label would have been happier if Cobain had written a bunch of power ballads and asked Bob Rock to make them sparkle, it's not like the grown-ups hammered him in the press—David Geffen personally

called *Newsweek* to complain about the accuracy of their report. My suspicion is that the label merely wanted an album that large numbers of people might like, and they did not think such a desire precluded the band from making an album that was valid.

But Nirvana (or at least Cobain, and possibly bassist Krist Novoselic) did not agree. They could not reconcile the dissonance between mass success and artistic merit; interestingly, they assumed combining mass success *with* dissonance was the only way to salvage any merit at all. And this reality requires some very weird questions: Why did *In Utero* need to be conventionally “bad” in order for it to be exceptionally good? And—perhaps more importantly—why did that fraction of badness only matter if people knew *that the badness was intentional*?

3 Nirvana began recording *In Utero* in February of 1993, the same month the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms raided the Mount Carmel compound in Waco, Texas, the home of self-styled doomsday prophet David Koresh and his disciples in the Branch Davidian cult. The raid resulted in the death of six Davidians and four agents, spawning a fifty-one-day siege that ended with over seventy people dying in a fire that was started (or inadvertently created) by a military assault on the compound, ordered by U.S. attorney general Janet Reno. This armed offensive against private U.S. citizens was seen as the last resort against Koresh and his followers after the ATF had run out of alternatives, one of which was bombarding the compound with high-volume recordings of rabbits being slaughtered. I have never listened to the sounds of dying rabbits, so I don’t really know what that sounds like; I suspect the vocals are not low in the mix. “We will never know whether there was a better solution,” Reno eventually testified in 1995, although one could argue that any solution that did not involve the government burning people alive might have been worth considering.

Koresh was a provocative public orator who could quote any passage of the Bible verbatim, instantly connecting it with whatever subject he happened to be discussing at the time. He had a lot of Cobainesque qualities: He had shoulder-length hair, played guitar, had a bad childhood, often complained of stomach problems, and had troubling taste in women. (He is alleged to have slept with a woman who was sixty-eight and a girl

who was twelve, although the state of Texas never had enough evidence to press statutory rape charges. It should also be noted that neither of those females was crazy enough to let a total stranger suckle their nipples in a Wendy's.) Like Cobain, he became obsessed with guns, appealed to disenfranchised eccentrics who felt cast out by society, and played the central role in his own demise; unlike Cobain, he was dangerously self-confident and (at least a little) insane. Writing about Koresh for *The Washington Post* in the wake of the Waco disaster, neuropsychiatrist Richard Restack cited Karl Menninger's chief indicators of psychosis: "preoccupation with persecution, usually associated with grandiosity; more or less continuous erratic, disorganized excitement accompanied by irascibility; bizarre delusional ideas coupled with obvious indifference to social expectations; and pervasive convictions of evil or wickedness in self or others." These were indeed the qualities of David Koresh, and the reason we classify him as "insane" is because he cultivated those qualities himself. But those were also the core qualities of Cobain; the difference is that they were mostly manufactured by society (and were therefore real). Cobain trusted almost no one. He felt like people were viewing him as messianic; he thought they were searching for symbolism in his most minor actions. All of this was true. He was expected to entertain thousands of people in a cathartic, chaotic musical explosion and then answer inane questions about what that performance meant. He was a heavy drug user who could not comprehend why people liked his music, or even that he was under no social obligation to continue producing it. He saw "wickedness" in things that were not wicked in any significant way (the music of Pearl Jam, generally positive coverage in *Rolling Stone*, fraternity bozos buying his records at Target), mostly because the social role he was burdened to bear required that he remain inflexible about teenage ideals normal adults would never seriously consider. Koresh decided he was literally God. Cobain was told he was figuratively God. Taken on balance, which would make a man crazier?

4 It's hard to imagine any artist more shamed by his commercial success than Cobain, mostly because no one has ever made so much money by defining himself as anticommercial. There's a famous story about how Cobain was outraged at Courtney Love's decision to purchase a Lexus

automobile; he forced her to return it to the dealership so they could go back to driving a pre-*Nevermind* Volvo. After his suicide, that Lexus became wildly symbolic, a metaphor that confounds anyone who wasn't nourished by (or force-fed) punk rock idealism. I remember trying to explain this to a fellow newspaper journalist in 1998, a few days after the premiere of Nick Broomfield's documentary *Kurt and Courtney*. I have slowly come to understand why my attempt at explanation was so unfathomable.

"Who the fuck cares if she bought a Lexus?" the reporter asked me. "He could afford it. It's just a nice car. Why should his wife have to drive a shitty car?"

"But it wasn't just a nice car," I said. "It was a Lexus. A *Lexus*. That's a specific kind of nice car. Everyone knows what owning a Lexus means. To Cobain, a lavender limousine would have been preferable to a Lexus, because at least that would have been gratuitous and silly. The limousine is aware of its excess; a Lexus is at ease with it. A Lexus is a car for a serious rich person. There are no ironic Lexus drivers, or even post-ironic Lexus drivers."

"But Kurt Cobain wasn't ironically rich," the reporter responded. "He was literally rich."

"Yes, but he got rich by being the kind of person who self-identified with the underclass. Owning a Lexus made him feel hypocritical."

"Well, a rich person who self-identifies as being poor is certainly more hypocritical than a rich person whose wife drives a Lexus."

I must admit, even at the time of this conversation, I did not totally buy what I was arguing. The idea of Kurt forcing Courtney to return that car made me *like* Cobain more, but it also made him seem confused in an unknowingly solipsistic way. It's like when Oprah Winfrey creates a game show where the whole goal is to give money away to sycophantic strangers: It's an impossible act to criticize, because (of course) charity is wonderful. Yet there's something perverse about high-profile public altruism; it always feels like the individual is trying to purchase "good person" status with money they could never spend on themselves, anyway. Oprah is doing something good, but not necessarily for the motive of goodness. And the motive matters. The situation with Cobain and the Lexus was both similar and different: He was trying to retain "real person" status by *not* spending the money he was convinced he did not deserve. But that makes no sense. A

“real” real person lets his dippy wife buy a Lexus when he has the GNP of Mexico in his checking account. No one in suburban Seattle was going to see Cobain behind the wheel of a used Volvo and forget that he could buy a better car; he merely looked like a millionaire trying to convince people that he still wanted to be the kind of guy who refused to buy a Lexus. Which is very, very different than simply not wanting one. Which he obviously realized, which is why he felt so awful.

In Utero sounds like what it is: Guilt Rock.

4A The most mind-bending episode in the history of the ABC program *Lost* is the finale of its third season, mostly because it’s the first time the show deviated from its pattern of using the narrative device of the flashback (which provided clarity as to who individual characters truly are) and started to employ flash-forwards (which usually serve to make the motives and machinations of the plot all the more twisted). The third season ends with the story’s overt protagonist and failed savior, Dr. Jack Shephard (Matthew Fox), desperate and paranoid at the airport, pleading with his love interest Kate (Evangeline Lilly) about how they must return to the mystical island from which they escaped. Jack is racked with remorse and culpability over what has transpired on the island; he has become alienated from everyone in his life, addicted to drugs, and suicidal. He cannot move beyond the singular experience that has come to define everything about his identity. And how do we know this? Well, partially because this is what he says. But also because—earlier in the same episode—Jack drives around Los Angeles aimlessly, wearing sunglasses and listening to “Scentless Apprentice” a decade after its release.

In Utero sounds like what it is: Guilt Rock.

4B In between *Nevermind* and *In Utero*, Nirvana released a B-side collection titled *Incesticide* that contained Cobain’s finest first-person narrative (“Sliver”), a great Vaselines cover (“Molly’s Lips”), two semi-okay originals (“Dive” and “Aneurysm”), something called “Aero Zeppelin” (which doesn’t sound like Aerosmith or Led Zeppelin), and a bunch of other songs I never listen to. The most interesting aspect of the record is the unorthodox liner notes, written by Cobain and printed in a

thick, zine-like font. In later pressings of the record, Geffen discontinued these notes, which was both a wise and tragic decision. They open with Cobain telling a protracted story about how he was able to have an old album by the Raincoats mailed to him from London, and how this experience made him “happier than playing in front of thousands of people each night, rock-god idolization from fans, music industry plankton kissing my ass, and the millions of dollars I made last year.” He goes on to talk about how his wife has been persecuted for choosing “not to function the way the white corporate man insists” and how she is preyed upon by an “army of devoted traitor women.” He tells a few people to fuck off for thinking he’s “naïve and stupid” (not sure who he means here), compares his band to Cheap Trick and the Knack, and poses a request to his fans: “If any of you in any way hate homosexuals, people of a different color, or women, please do this one favor for us—leave us the fuck alone! Don’t come to our shows and don’t buy our records.”

There is, certainly, a lot of obvious weirdness to this letter, most notably (a) it’s hard to imagine too many Nirvana completists self-identifying themselves as women-hating racist homophobes, regardless of how true that designation might have been, and (b) it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to tell people not to buy your album by including that message *inside* a shrink-wrapped CD. Kurt did not seem to have a very good grip on the return policies at most mainstream music outlets. But hey, it was December of 1992. Who could cast such stones? Nineteen ninety-two was the absolute apex of the PC era: The sexy goofs in Sonic Youth were writing entertaining songs about Anita Hill while lots of ponytailed boys in English 301 were trying to get laid by demanding the elimination of schoolyard dodgeball (granted, these events may not have been *directly* connected, but I think you know what I mean). Writing liner notes about how people needed to give more respect to your overbearing wife was simply what “enlightened” artists were doing at the time. Nobody should hold this against him. But there is at least one line from his manifesto that still strikes me as meaningful: “I don’t feel the least bit guilty for commercially exploiting a completely exhausted Rock youth Culture because, at this point in rock history, Punk Rock (while still sacred to some) is, to me, dead and gone.”

So tell me this: In the scope of your lifetime, how many people have you known who said they didn’t feel guilty about something *you never accused*

them of doing? And—if and when this happened—how often did the expression of their nonguilt only serve to prove the complete opposite of what they literally said?

This record came out three months before Nirvana began recording *In Utero*. This is not a coincidence.

5 How good was Nirvana? Generally, we accept that they were the best commercial rock band from a specific era of rock . . . but were they *great*? In 1998, VH1 surveyed a shitload of unnamed musicians and industry insiders and asked them to rank the one hundred greatest rock artists of all time. The top five were the Beatles, the Stones, Hendrix, Zeppelin, and Dylan. Nirvana placed forty-second, but they were the only “modern” band on the entire list (“modern” meaning that their entire body of work was produced within the same decade as the poll). If this same poll were conducted today, I suspect Nirvana would still hang in the top fifty, but they would certainly not rank any better and might even drop a few spots. The release of the 2004 Nirvana box set *With the Lights Out* somewhat validated the criticism Nirvana skeptics had been levying for years—the group simply did not produce enough material to warrant canonization.

This, however, seems wrong to me. I look at canonized rock bands the same way I look at canonized U.S. presidents. Even if America lasts ten thousand years, the list of our greatest presidents will never change; it will always include Washington and Lincoln and Jefferson.² They created the specific criteria for how we classify “greatness” in a president. To say a president is “great” is to argue that he (or she) is exhibiting leadership and judgment that’s reminiscent of George Washington, which means that no new president can ever be as great as the person he (or she) is rewarded for emulating. Franklin Roosevelt is now included on the list of canonized presidents, but he cannot be on the same level as Lincoln; his greatness emerged from showing Lincolnian resolve during a period of twentieth-century crisis.

In the same way, the canon of rock ‘n’ roll is already set in concrete. Nirvana can’t be as great as the Beatles or the Stones, and neither can anyone else; the greatness of any modern act is measured against what the Beatles and the Stones have come to represent as entities. But the reason I still think Nirvana warrants inclusion among the greatest bands of all time

is because they established a new kind of band. They were the first rock group of the media age that was (a) regularly defined as the biggest band in the free world, while (b) using their espoused hatred of that designation as the principal means for their on-going success. Every band that becomes megasuccessful ultimately feels trapped by that adulation; the sensation of self-hatred is common among artists. What made Nirvana different was how that overt self-hatred defined the totality of their being. It was their principal aesthetic. They always seemed like a group that was producing popular culture against their will. This notion is something they invented accidentally, so all future bands that mine this worldview can only hope to replicate what Nirvana already popularized. As such, they are in the canon (on the JV team, but still).

2A *In Utero* opens with Dave Grohl tapping his sticks together three times before the rest of the band strikes a dissonant, awkward chord, which—now, and maybe even then—seems like a band taunting all the people who wanted to like this record for nonmusical reasons. And there were *a lot* of people like that; regardless of Cobain’s alleged obsession with the pop world thinking his album would be terrible, just about everyone who bought it immediately liked it (or at least claimed that they did). The mainstream reviews were positive: four stars in *Rolling Stone*, eight out of ten in *NME*, an “A” from Robert Christgau at *The Village Voice*, and a ranking of third in *Spin*’s 1993 albums of the year list (behind Liz Phair and Dr. Dre). It was platinum by Thanksgiving. More interestingly, the pre-release rumors about how difficult *In Utero* was supposedly going to sound had the opposite impact—people felt smart for enjoying a “difficult” record and were reticent to complain about its abrasive nature. A similar thing happened to Radiohead when they put out *Kid A* in 2000: The album’s prerelease coverage so vociferously insisted that anti-intellectual audiences would not understand *Kid A* that people were terrified to admit being bored by *any* of it.

Within the critical circles I inhabit (and certainly within the critical circles I do not), it has become common to hear people argue that *In Utero* is superior to *Nevermind* and that the pop-metal sheen on songs like “On a Plain” and “Lithium” made the earlier effort seem craven and clinical. *Nevermind* was cool to kids who were not. This is a pretty ridiculous

criticism, but—somewhat sadly—that ridiculous critic was the straw man Cobain was most concerned about. And that concern is not sad because of how it affected the album, because the album still turned out pretty good. It's sad because it illustrates Cobain's darkest, most depressing artistic weakness: He could not stop himself from caring about people who would only appreciate his work if he were a mainstream failure, just like they were. And that was never going to happen, because true genius is commercially uncontainable.

By and large, *Nevermind* and *In Utero* are not as different as Cobain had hoped: The songwriting is pretty similar (“Smells Like Teen Spirit” and “Rape Me” are essentially identical, both sounding like Boston’s “More Than a Feeling”). The meaningful difference is that on *Nevermind*, the talent is top loaded and assertively present (the “talent” in this case being the melody and the drumming). On *In Utero*, the talent is still there, but it's buried under three meters of abstract credibility. All things considered, Albini actually did a wonderful job³ of keeping the song structures as dynamic as they deserved, especially since (a) he always takes his cues from whatever the band claims to want, and (b) the band actively wanted to make a record that sounded awful to their pre-existing fan base, or at least to anyone who thought the drums on *Dr. Feelgood* sounded boss. The recording process took six days. (In an interview with *Perfecting Sound Forever* author Greg Milner, Albini asserted, “If your record takes more than five or six days to make, it's bound to suck.”) Compared to the theoretical rawness Cobain claimed to desire, *In Utero* merely sounds less reassuring and less immediate than any musical product that's ever sold five million copies. Still, Albini became the fall guy for why *In Utero* seemed so self-absorbed with its own coolness, probably because—unlike 99 percent of record producers—he was actually famous enough to publicly criticize. Gold Mountain Entertainment, the group that managed Nirvana, tried to blame Albini entirely.

“He is God, and he knows what's good,” Danny Goldberg said sarcastically during the prerelease melee. Goldberg was the founder of Gold Mountain. “And if the artist doesn't like it, he is somehow selling out because they don't agree with his personal vision. Steve Albini takes the position that anything he thinks is good is good. He's David Koresh.”

3A It is difficult for me to write objectively about Koresh. It's difficult because I cannot see any framework where he and his followers were not murdered by the U.S. government (or—in the absolute best-case scenario—driven to commit mass suicide). In 2000, I (along with two other *Akron Beacon Journal* reporters) spent a month reinvestigating the 1970 national guard shootings on the campus of Kent State University, a chapter in American history that is universally seen as a political tragedy. And it was. But I must admit that what happened at Waco seems worse. Kent State is tragic because four innocent people died while peacefully protesting an unpopular war. It was the result of underprepared national guardsmen responding extemporaneously (and poorly) in a situation where they felt physically threatened. May 4, 1970, was the single worst day of a mostly horrible era. But what happened on April 19, 1993, was bigger. It wasn't four people who died—it was seventy-six. And those seventy-six were hiding in a bunker, cut off from the media, and threatening no one. There was nothing spontaneous about it; the federal government had been thinking about this for over a month. The Branch Davidians were essentially executed for being weirdos.

I realize Koresh was fucking crazy. I'm not denying it. *He was fucking crazy.* Though the child-molestation stuff has never been verified, I don't doubt it. The fact that he believed he had to sire twenty-four kids so that they could rule the world seems like a creative way for a psycho to meet girls. Anyone who reads every line of the Bible as non-metaphoric text has limited credibility. So I realize he was fucking crazy. But our government does not typically kill people for being crazy. In fact, the reason they killed Koresh was because a minority of the population in Waco thought he was sane. And I know I probably shouldn't write "They killed Koresh," because no one will ever know who started the fires inside the Waco compound (academic Kenneth Newport has written extensively about how he believes the fires were set by the Davidians themselves, since this behavior falls in line with their belief system). That will always be the central question to this debate, and it's significantly more than a minor detail. But in ways that are more meaningful, it almost doesn't matter at all.

The U.S. Treasury Department reviewed the Waco disaster in 1999. One of the reviewers was Henry Ruth Jr., who had served as a prosecutor in the Watergate trial. "At least part of the ATF's motivation," said Ruth, "even if it never rose to the surface of discussion, was to enforce the morals of our

society. To enforce the psyche of right thinking by retaliating against these odd people.” That, ultimately, was the crime committed by the Branch Davidians: oddness. And they weren’t even that odd: One of the Davidians was Wayne Martin, one of the first African-Americans to graduate from Harvard Law School. A common misconception about the Davidians was that they were all separatist Texans, probably because the only voice ever associated with the cult is Koresh’s drawl; the community was, in fact, remarkably international. Moreover, their unifying element does not strike me as unreasonable: They thought the world was ending. Which is not necessarily a ludicrous thing to believe—at some point, the world *is* going to end. I’m not sure why someone would assume that’s going to happen sooner than later, but I also have no fucking idea why the government would care if a hundred Texans were betting short. The ATF claimed the Davidians were stockpiling guns, a claim that is both true and absurd; the reason the Davidians stockpiled weapons was because they made money by buying and selling them at gun shows, one of the few ways they could make money without holding jobs in the outside world. The idea that these self-interested Bible scholars were hoarding weapons in order to *attack the rest of America* only proves that no one in the government (or the media) tried to understand those people at all. Granted, some of the weapons were illegal. That’s true. They did have some AK-47s in the mix. But perhaps they thought they needed a few assault rifles, because perhaps they thought the FBI would drive tanks into their homes and fire tear gas at their children while broadcasting the phrase “This is not an assault” over an intercom. Maybe they thought the government would shoot at them from helicopters and burn them alive. They were, after all, insane.

I’m not going to attempt to prove that the FBI actively ignited the fires at Waco or consciously vented the compound to accelerate the speed of the blaze. Those arguments can be better understood by watching the William Gazecki documentary *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, the best resource for what (probably) happened that day. I’m actually going to go the other way on this; for the sake of argument, I will accept Joseph Biden’s take on the Waco holocaust: “David Koresh and the Branch Davidians set fire to themselves and committed suicide. The government did not do that.” This is quite possibly false, but I will accept it. And I will accept it because if it is true, it changes nothing. If he destroyed himself and his followers, he did so because life convinced him that he was right about everything (and that this

event was *supposed* to happen). He was being the person he had to be. And while that's a doomed perspective for anyone to embrace, it's certainly not uncommon: Koresh merely picked the wrong myths to believe unconditionally.

1A A lot of my favorite bands habitually wrecked their shit. Paul Stanley smashed a guitar at the end of every Kiss concert (they were specifically modified to self-destruct on impact). Nikki Sixx of Mötley Crüe always smashed his bass, whipping it by the strap like a Jamaican farmer flogging a goat. When Guns N' Roses went on *Headbangers Ball*, they ended their segment by destroying the entire MTV set. This kind of thing was not uncommon and never unexpected. And because it happened during the 1980s, the meaning of such behavior was specific: It proved that your band was successful. Metal bands did not smash guitars as an extension of chaos or rebellion—they smashed them to prove they could easily buy more. It wasn't a punk move. It was an antipunk move. That's why I liked it.

The Clash smashed their instruments for political freedom, but also because it made for excellent photo opportunities. For years, the indie art rockers in . . . And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead destroyed their equipment at the conclusion of every single show, mostly to make people wonder how in the hell they were able to afford doing so without selling any records. When Nirvana was new, audiences were shocked when they destroyed their stuff—that was pretty much the only stuff they had. By the time they were touring in support of *In Utero*, people were equally shocked if they walked off the stage without Kurt diving into the drum kit like Walter Payton on third and goal. Near the end, it was widely known (or at least universally suspected) that Sub Pop founder Jonathan Poneman was mailing Cobain innumerable pawnshop guitars that he could break at his convenience, supposedly because Kurt was really attached to the Fender Mustang he had used during the recording of *In Utero*. He was still breaking things for the benefit of other people, but only things he did not want or need.

On a human-emptiness scale of one to ten (one being “emotionally complete,” ten being “metaphysically devoid of feeling”), this is a fourteen.

2B “So many people would be expecting me to be writing about the last two years—about our experiences with drugs and having a new child and all the press coming down on us and the stuff like that. But I decided to just use experiences from books and other stories, without even dealing with my life.” Cobain said these words in February of 1994, on a boat, smoking a cigarette. “There are little bits of my life [on *In Utero*]. Personal things. But for the most part, it’s very unpersonal. Impersonal.”

This is how it always goes: An artist gambles against society, using his own life as currency. He writes (in this case, songs) about his own experience, but in a manner that is malleable enough to be appreciated by the collective whole. When this is successful, the artist is validated. But if the artist grows too successful, the gears start grinding in reverse; people begin to see absolutely everything the artist says or does as a kind of public art that’s open to interpretation. This makes the artist paranoid and creatively paralyzed. As a result, the artist decides to ignore his own experience completely, insisting that he’s no longer the center of whatever he creates; instead, he will write about dead actresses who were sent to sanitariums or German novels about the olfactory sensation. His material will be “unpersonal.” But this never works. The artist cannot stop himself from injecting his own experience into these subjects, because that is who the artist is—either you always write about yourself or you never do. It’s not a process you select. So now the artist is trying not to write about himself (but doing so anyway), which means other people’s interpretations of the work will now be *extra* inaccurate, because the artist has surrendered his agency. Any time you try to tell people what your work isn’t supposed to mean, you only make things worse.

The lyrics from *In Utero* everyone recognized as consequential were the first two lines: “Teenage angst has paid off well / Now I’m bored and old.” This was pretty straightforward and expository, and it was funny in the way Kurt was often funny (i.e., funny in a way that wouldn’t make anyone laugh aloud). To me, the most compelling lines on the album are the ones that seem profound *because* they’re inherently meaningless. On “Serve the Servants,” Cobain moans, “I tried hard to have a father / But instead I had a dad.” That complaint would seem just as valid if it were exactly reversed.⁴ The album’s closing lines—off “All Apologies,” a song many uncreative critics would come to classify as “the real suicide note”—are the repetition of the phrase “All in all is all we are.” Here again, it’s hard to see much

difference if the sentiment is juxtaposed. It's kind of like how Vince Lombardi is famous for supposedly saying, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." It feels insightful, but only because of what we know about the speaker—the words themselves are completely interchangeable. Sometimes I wonder if Cobain's transcendent depression was ultimately due to the combination of (a) having so many people caring about his words, despite the fact that (b) he really didn't have that much to say.

"There's nothing that hurts me more than being called a cult leader. If I'm wrong, people like me don't deserve to live." This is not Cobain speaking. This is David Koresh again, talking to ATF negotiator Jim Cavanaugh from inside the Waco compound. However, I think Kurt would have understood Koresh completely. "Look: I'm just an instrument, okay? I show them, out of a book, what God teaches. Then it's for them to decide."

But how do we tell the difference between an instrument and its sound? And—more importantly—what if we're uninterested in accepting that distinction?

6 I was down in Australia when the Waco debacle happened, and the Australians had a big contingency at the Branch Davidian compound, and I'm from Texas. So they were very curious. They were always asking me all about it: "Oh, this guy is so *weird*. This Koresh is so *weird*." And I was thinking: "Well, wait a minute: A frustrated rock musician with a messianic complex, armed to the teeth, and trying to fuck everything that moves. I don't know how to tell you this, but he sounds like every one of my friends from Austin."

—Bill Hicks, 1993

7 It is unfair to compare *In Utero* to Waco. It is unfair to compare Cobain to Koresh. I know that. They are not the same; just because two things happen at the same time doesn't mean they're connected. Babe Ruth's first home run and the premiere of *Birth of a Nation* both happened in 1915, but that doesn't dictate a relationship. If you stare long enough at anything, you will start to find similarities. The word *coincidence* exists in order to stop

people from seeing meaning where none exists. So, sure, comparing Cobain and Koresh is a little unfair.

Although I'm not sure which one it's unfair to. I feel sorry for both of them. I can see it both ways. That's my problem.

5A Before he was a generational voice and flannel advocate, Cobain was a pretend roadie for the Melvins, a band who used to penalize festival audiences by crushing them with avalanches of tuneless, high-volume feedback. I experienced this at Ozzfest in 1998, inside the Akron Rubber Bowl, under a 102-degree sun; the sound of dying rabbits might not have been preferable, but it could not have been any worse. Still, it's easy to understand why someone like Cobain (or anyone else) would be drawn to the Melvins: They are more honest than virtually any band I can think of.

"I know what rock 'n' roll is about," Melvins guitarist King Buzzo once said in an interview for Croatian television. "Most of it's a bunch of greedy, drug-taking monsters. Whoremongering drug addicts that are probably no good for anybody, generally speaking."

This is the mentality the young Cobain hoped to emulate. It was an aesthetic that ultimately proved impossible to adopt, simply because Nirvana got too big to make such contempt sincere. But Cobain still *wanted* to think this way about "mainstream rock," and he wanted his audience to think this way, too. He wanted to play music for people who had King Buzzo's worldview. He wanted to make Nirvana culture a hermetic culture; he wanted it to be insular and manageable and uncompromised. His strategy was to destroy a sector of his audience by making a record that a person who thought like King Buzzo would appreciate but a person who thought like Billy Corgan would find boring. And this was never going to work. It was never going to work because the sector of the audience Cobain hoped to alienate did not really care what *In Utero* sounded like. What Cobain failed to accept is that there is nothing that "sounds mainstream" to mainstream listeners. Music critics have an inflexible description of what mainstream music sounds like, but music consumers do not; to the consumer, the definition of *mainstream* is whatever everyone else is listening to. In 1993, "mainstream rock" was Nirvana, regardless of their style or intention. The sonic dimensions were a minor detail. Had *In Utero* sounded like *Stoner Witch*, it still would have gone multiplatinum.

Conversely, the Branch Davidians *were* able to construct a hermetic culture: In 1955, they were able to contract a smaller sect of hard-core cultists from the Seventh-Day Adventists, and Koresh splintered that population into an even smaller group of “Seven Seals” scholars during the 1980s. What Koresh did accept (but failed to fully grasp) was that there is something called “*living* mainstream,” and that all mainstream livers are unyielding about what that concept is supposed to denote. Anyone who chooses to live in a manner that contradicts this concept is never going to get sympathy from anyone. This is not to say that average people will want you to die for having radical views, nor does it mean that living in a fucked-up compound with fifteen wives is merely “different” than living in a three-bedroom house in suburban Houston. But it *does* mean that if the government needlessly decides to attack your home with tanks, the rest of the world is going to assume you must have deserved it. If you openly admit that you’re waiting for the world to end in fire, no one will take your side when somebody makes that happen. They will insist you should be happy about getting your wish. And maybe that’s true; maybe what happened to the Branch Davidians on April 19 only proved their vision was always correct. They insulated their doomsday society enough to make it the totality of their world, and that world was, in fact, coming to an end.

So in this one way, I suppose, Cobain and Koresh are very different. The former failed at his attempt to separate his true followers from the rest of America, and he destroyed himself for that failure. The latter was destroyed by others for succeeding at the same goal.

It’s fascinating and stupid to watch adults destroy things on purpose.

1B When Nirvana toured England in the fall of 1990, people told them not to demolish themselves. Melvins drummer Dale Crover was serving as the band’s temporary percussionist (this was before Dave Grohl joined the band), and he made Nirvana sign a contract that barred any member of the band from jumping into his drum kit or smashing equipment onstage. Crover’s argument, in short, was that destroying one’s own set was fucking boring. The group complied.

When Nirvana made *In Utero* in spring of ’93, everyone they knew told them not to demolish themselves. All they had to do was make a record. Any record would do. Whatever they produced would be exactly what the

world wanted. But that was only true as long as nobody believed they cared; the reason America loved Nirvana was because they were convinced that Nirvana did not need their love. And that was not the case. Nirvana *did* need love, and that was Kurt Cobain's shame. So how do you make a record for people who want you to prove that you don't care how much they enjoy it? By making it sound "bad." You make it sound *a little great*, but you also make it sound a little bad. Because then everyone is happy, except for the alleged genius writing all the songs.

The world was ending. It was. It was ending in dissonance and it was ending in fire, and the vocals would be low in the mix. Besides, there is nothing worse than calling someone a cult leader. People like that don't deserve to live.

1. Twenty-one years after the fact, one of the guitars Cobain smashed at a 1989 show in Hoboken, New Jersey, sold on eBay for \$100,000.

[2](#). When Arthur Schlesinger Sr. pioneered the “presidential greatness poll” in 1948, the top five were Lincoln, Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Jefferson. Only Wilson appears to be seriously fading, probably because his support for the World War I-era Sedition Act now seems outrageous; in this analogy, Woodrow is like the Doors and the Sedition Act is Oliver Stone.

[3](#). For the especially serious listener, *In Utero*'s liner notes even included instructions on how to set one's equalizer for maximum effect: The bass should be at +2 and the treble should be at +5.

[4](#). There is, in fact, an episode of *M*A*S*H* where Major Winchester admits to Hawkeye Pierce how he privately envies the relationship Hawkeye has with his family patriarch, precisely because he only had a father while Pierce “had a dad.” This may also explain why David Ogden Stiers did not become addicted to heroin.

About Chuck Klosterman



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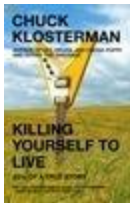
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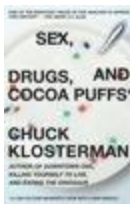
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